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Review

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In a letter dated August 19, 1949, T. S. Eliot described his latest play to fellow author and sometime playwright, Djuna Barnes: “THE COCKTAIL PARTY is the name of it, but that’s only what I call it in order to entice the public—the esoteric name is UPADHAMMAM SAMUPPADA, but nobody would promote a play with a name like that. Well, we’ll see.” In their continuing correspondence, Barnes never questioned the meaning of Eliot’s “esoteric” title and he offered no further explanation. To date, no mention of this title appears in criticism of the play, although various accounts cite “One-Eyed Riley” (a bawdy song included in the play) as an earlier title. Given that the relationship between Eliot and Barnes was colored by his role as her editor and mentor, it is tempting to think that Eliot is simply playing Old Possum to a younger writer. Yet, this seemingly simple statement contains two elements central to understanding Eliot’s intentions as a playwright, namely his deliberate efforts to create a popular, though poetic, theatre and his appropriation of Buddhist philosophy as a framework for his work in that theatre.

REALITY AND ITS DOUBLE IN T. S. ELIOT’S THE COCKTAIL PARTY

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By acknowledging his desire to promote the play and revealing its original title, Eliot contradicts much of the received criticism of both his persona as a writer and the meaning of the play itself. Though often overlooked, Eliot’s desire successfully to “entice the public” is consistent with many of his writings on theatre, which consistently favor the popular or lowbrow, such as the musical hall, as well as Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, whom he saw both as an artistic genius and popular writer. As he wrote in “The Possibility of a Poetic Drama” (1922), “The Elizabethan drama was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art” (original emphasis, 70). In “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism” (1933), Eliot further argued that “The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social ‘usefulness’ for poetry, is the theatre” (146). If we consider only his titles, it is clear that the Eliot who renamed “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” “Wanna Go Home Baby?” and “All Aboard for Natchez, Cairo, and St. Louis” as The Waste Land, Sweeney Agonistes, and Ash-Wednesday, had clearly reversed himself when he turned “Upadhammam Samutpada” into The Cocktail Party. As he told professor Alan Downer in 1949, he intended to write plays, “Until I can convince people that I know how to write a popular play” (Qtd. Smidt, 161).

By any objective standard, it must be recognized that The Cocktail Party accomplished just that, at least at the time of its first production. Though a significant proportion of the play’s criticism reacted negatively to Eliot’s work in the theatre (and much more since that time), the play successfully ran on both Broadway and in London’s West End, won the Tony award for Best Play in 1950, and appeared on the New York Times bestseller list. Perhaps more importantly, Eliot himself believed that he had solved the “problem” of poetic drama. In his lecture, “Poetry and Drama” delivered at Harvard University in 1950 (published 1951), Eliot wrote that whereas Murder in the Cathedral (1934) was the work of a “beginner” and The Family Reunion (1939) was “defective,” The Cocktail Party followed “the aesthetic rule to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility” (39).

Yet, the play itself seemingly contradicts Eliot’s claim. The characters in the play do very little, and almost nothing happens on stage. The three acts of the play take place in two locations: the living room of Edward and Lavinia who are hosting a cocktail party; and the office of Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, a kind of psychotherapist. Such locales invite talk, endless conversations that do little either to develop the characters (though they do reveal backstory), or to create dramatic action. Indeed, it is this lack of action that torments the characters of the play. As Edward says at one point, “I see that my life was determined long ago/And that the struggle to escape from it/Is only a make-believe, a pretence” (326). The lack of action, prompted some critics of the play to denounce the play as merely literature (and bad literature at that) on stage. In response to the many positive reviews of the play, Alan Dent wrote in 1950 that, “The critic in me is alarmed that a play so deplorably weak in stagecraft should be hailed as a masterpiece” (n.p.).

Eliot’s original “esoteric” title suggests a reason for this lack of overt action and obvious stagecraft, in contrast to the received wisdom that the play is either a Christian tale of conversion, told through Eliot’s adaptation of Euripides Alcestis. “Upadhammam samutpada” roughly translates as “the coming into
existence of the false law or doctrine.”) Upa typically refers to the lesser or the younger, while Dhamma (also translated as Dharma) is a multivalent term referring in Buddhism to law, religion, morality, duty, among many others. This notion of law, though a common translation, should not be confused with connotations of obligation, or restriction. According to Buddhist tradition, Dhamma is predominantly a guide to the transformation by which a person lets go the limiting delusions that cause attachment to the physical world (and thus suffering) thereby achieving enlightenment, or Nibb?na (Nirv?na). In his *Buddhism in Translations: Passages Selected from the Buddhist Sacred Books*, Henry Clarke Warren (Eliot’s professor at Harvard) translated Dhamma as “any established law, condition, or fact, either of nature or of human institutions. It is the word I render by Doctrine when it signifies the Buddha’s teachings” (xxiv). More recent scholarship, such as Peter Harvey’s *Introduction to Buddhism*, explains it thus: “Buddhism thus essentially consists of understanding, practicing and realizing Dhamma” (2). Samutpada means sam (together)-ut (up)-pada (to be, become), thus “to come into existence together.” Thus, the full translation suggests the coming into existence of the lesser, or false doctrine.4

This notion of the false or lesser law is puzzling when one considers Eliot as the playwright of religious conversion. So often seen as a Christian playwright, it is odd that he considered giving the play a Buddhist title. Although Eliot’s study of Indian and Asian philosophy, language, and religions at Harvard is well known, such considerations have rarely been seen within his drama. One might be tempted to assume that in the play Buddhism is perhaps a lesser law than Christianity, but both the ubiquity of Buddhist ideals and the lack of clear redemption according to either faith complicate this argument. Indeed the two religious traditions appear to intertwine throughout the play, perhaps following the example of his Harvard professors Irving Babbitt and Henry Clarke Warren. Both explicitly acknowledge the similarities between Buddhism and Christianity in their writings. For example, in his essay “Buddha and the Occident,” Babbitt notes similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, and Warren describes the concept of karma as “not so unlike Christian ideas” (209). To date, discussions of Christianity have dominated the play’s reception. Since its first production, *The Cocktail Party* has been read in light of Eliot’s conversion and his early religious drama, such as his pageant play *The Rock* (1934) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (1939). William Arrowsmith’s review of *The Cocktail Party* in *The Hudson Review* (1950), carefully outlines the numerous Christian allusions throughout the play, and Christopher Innes in his recent survey, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century*, subtitiles his section on Eliot, “the drama of conversion” (461). Innes argues that Eliot’s drama was an extension of his critique of modern culture as expressed in poems like *The Waste Land*, and the “practical expression of his Christian ideal of communion, extending outward in performance to create a community” (463).

Eliot himself complicated things further when he announced in his lecture “Poetry and Drama” (1950, published 1951) that “no one of my acquaintance (and no dramatic critics) recognized the source of my story in the *Alcestis* of Euripides” (38). Since Eliot never publicly acknowledged a Buddhist influence, it is impossible to know his intention with certainty, though he was certainly well read on the subject. As a philosophy student at Harvard, Eliot studied with the leaders of the field of Orientalist studies, pioneered by Irving Babbitt, Charles Lanman, and James Wood. Indeed, his title may also be a reworking of Babbitt’s translation of *The Dhammapada*, published in 1936. At Harvard, Eliot studied Buddhism, Hindu, as well as courses in Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit. Such studies cast his work in Greek and European philosophy, and even his own identity, into sharp relief. As he reflected in *After Strange Gods* (1933):

My previous and concomitant study of European philosophy was hardly better than an obstacle. And I came to the conclusion—seeing also that the “influence” of Brahmin and Buddhist thought upon Europe, as in Schopenhauer, Hartmann, and Deussen, had largely been through romantic misunderstanding—that my only hope of really penetrating to the heart of that mystery would lie in forgetting how to think and feel as an American or a European. (34)
What is striking here is Eliot’s desire to remove himself from his own sense of national and cultural identity in order to understand “that mystery” of Buddhist thought. This removal, not unlike that of the actor into character, suggests duplicity of identity that runs through the play as well as Eliot’s larger aims for the poetic theatre. In one of his earliest essays on the subject, “Rhetoric and Poetic Drama” (1919), Eliot wrote that “The really fine rhetoric of Shakespeare occurs in situations where a character in the play sees himself in a dramatic light “(original emphasis, 27). Later in his essay “John Marston” (1934), he argued that,

It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once...In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness; or the drama has an under-pattern, less manifest than the theatrical one. (173)

As I argue here, such suggestions of dramatic doubleness in part derive from the Buddhist distinction between the conventional truth (samvritisatya) and the more profound ultimate truth (param?rtha-satya). In this context, the influence of Buddhist philosophy is perhaps most relevant to his work in the theatre. This is not to ignore the Christian or Greek influences in The Cocktail Party, but to suggest a third influence, one that lends itself particularly well to Eliot’s fascination with surfaces, appearances, and the nature of theatrical representation.

If we then read The Cocktail Party with an eye toward the central tenets of Buddhism, the apparent non-action of the characters attending the cocktail party becomes remarkably clearer, as does Eliot’s reason for attempting to write popular, if also poetic plays. The Cocktail Party itself is a fairly straightforward play modeled on English drawing-room comedy like that of Noel Coward and written in blank verse, or, as Clive Barnes wrote of the play in 1968, “the verse is deliberately flattened into the most prosaic poetry a great poet ever wrote” (42). The play opens in the London flat of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne, during a floundering cocktail party.

Over the course of the first act, the rather petty conflicts of the characters are slowly revealed. Just before the party, Lavinia has apparently left Edward, and we see the party in progress as Edward lamely attempts to get rid of his guests before they discover the true reason for Lavinia’s absence. Though the party eventually ends, the guests return one by one for intimate conversations with Edward. Through these conversations, we learn that Edward has just broken off his affair with the young Celia Coplestone and that she has broken the heart of equally young Peter Quilpe, who himself was also having an affair with the now absent Lavinia. Also in attendance at the party are The Uninvited Guest, who mysteriously knows the location of Lavinia and later reveals himself to be her psychotherapist, and two friends, Julia Shuttlethwaite and Alexander MacColgie Gibbs, both of whom eagerly attempt to take care of poor, neglected Edward much against his will.

Most of the plot is simplistic, at best. In the first act, Edward bemoans the loss of his wife, only to regret her return in Act Two. Lavinia and Edward part briefly, we are told, but are rather antagonistically reconciled by Sir Harcourt-Reilly by the end of the second act. Act Three returns the characters to the Chamberlaynes’ flat two years later, more or less as each was before, but no more resigned to their fate. Even the conversation has not evolved. The play opens with Alex telling a story about his adventures with the Maharaja and by then end of the third act, Alex tells the story of Celia in Kinkanja. On both occasions, he must repeat to Julia that, “There are no tigers,” an odd explanation since, to our knowledge, he never mentions tigers. Furthermore, although Alex claims in Act One that “I never tell the same story twice” (297), nearly all of his stories are indistinguishable one from the others, usually involving his adventures in what Julia calls a “strange place” (373) and almost always incomplete. Julia herself highlights this repetition on her exit from the first party in Act One, when in a rare moment of rhyme she chimes, “It’s such a nice party, I hate to leave it/It’s such a nice party, I’d like to repeat it” (302). Moreover, the dialogue of the play is full of internal repetitions. Characters echo dialogue back and forth, and three times Edward offers whiskey to the Uninvited Guest, while each time gin is requested.

The exception to this repetition is Celia, who in the
second act, actively breaks the cycle of repetition and, consequently, is the only character that does not return in Act Three. In Act Two, the uninvited guest from Act One reemerges as Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, and he presides over two therapeutic meetings, the first between Lavinia and Edward, and the second alone with Celia. It is in this second meeting that the tenor of the play changes considerably. Up until now, the characters have appeared almost universally foolish, complaining of petty problems and involved in relationships, common to other drawing-room comedies. Celia, however, complains that her world has become an illusion, and that this sense of unreality has become intolerable. Celia complains to Sir Reilly that her infatuation with Edward has overwhelmed her sense of reality:

Although those who experience it [emotion] may have no reality.
For what happened is remembered like a dream
In which one is exalted by intensity of loving...
And if all that is meaningless, I want to be cured
Of a craving for something I cannot find
And of the shame of never finding it. (363)

Celia most often has been interpreted as a Christian martyr, but her dramatic journey more closely parallels the path to Buddhist enlightenment than that of Christian salvation. Celia’s desire to be cured of her “cravings” is consistent with the transcendence of suffering according to the four noble truths of Buddhism: suffering is universal; its cause is desire; when desire ceases, suffering ceases; and suffering ceases by following the eight-fold path.

Celia’s despair of a world that seems to be wholly illusion repeats the Buddhist teaching that the world and the things in it are intangible and impermanent, and her desire for a relief to this suffering follows the Buddhist’s attempt to rid oneself of delusion, attachment, and desire. Celia’s awareness of the unreality of the world around her certainly marks her as distinct from the characters in the play. Indeed, she sees her romantic attachment to Edward in light of her own projected desires: “Can we only love/Something created by our own imagination?” (362).

Celia’s recognition of this falseness is not unlike the passage in Henry Clarke Warren’s translation, in which “The man who lives for sensual joys/And findeth delight therein/When joys of sense have taken flight/Doth smart as if with arrows pierced” (173). It is only after Edward rejects her, that Celia comes to the realization that their relationship with Edward was a fantasy: “A dream. I was happy in it until today” (324).

If Celia serves as a novice on the verge of enlightenment, Sir Reilly must be seen as a mentor Buddha figure, with Julia and Alex (the other two “Guardians”) serving the function of Bodhisattvas, those on the path to Nirvana who take on the task of helping others. Sir Reilly, like the Buddha himself, attempts to lead the other characters to insight, with limited success. He tells Edward that he would be happier without Lavinia and to “Resign yourself to be the fool you are” (308), perhaps following the Buddhist recommendation that, “The fool who knows his foolishness is wise at least so far” (Babbitt 12). During his meeting with Celia, Sir Reilly proposes two paths—one of ignorance, and another of enlightenment, or as he describes it, “illumination” (367). Significantly, the offer of ignorance is described as a return, which we might easily read as a rebirth: “If that is what you wish/I can reconcile you to the human condition/The condition to which some who have gone as far as you/Have succeeded in returning” (363). But the second path lacks the potential to return, “Those who go do not come back as [others] did” (365). His final words to Celia are, “Go in peace, my daughter./Work out your salvation with diligence” (366), exactly the final words of the Buddha according to Warren’s translation (109).

From here, Celia appears to follow the necessary steps for women to receive acceptance into a Buddhist order. In “The Admission of Women to the Order,” Buddha states that,

Women are competent...if they retire from the household life to the houseless one...to attain to the fruit of conversion, to attain to the fruit of once returning, to attain to the fruit of never returning, to attain to saintship. (Warren 444)

Like the women who join the Buddhist order, Celia leaves her London home for the “houseless” land of Kinkanja. In Act Three, Lavina asks if Celia has

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joined a nursing order. Alex, who has visited her and returns with news of her death, cryptically replies, “She had joined an order. A very austere one” (380), but he does not describe details of the order. Similarly, two years elapsed in the play between Act Two and Act Three, the amount of time specified for a novice to join the Buddhist order, and Celia, at least obliquely, attains “saintship” by the end, when Alex both compares her experiences to unnamed saints (384) and calls her death “happy,” like that of the Buddha’s own.

If Celia represents the path of a Buddhist saint, then Edward, Lavinia, and Peter Quilpe reflect the attachment to delusion and frustrated craving from which the eightfold path leads away. As with Celia, Sir Reilly attempts to enlighten Edward by convincing him to let go of his wife, repeating the Buddha’s own allegory that to give up attachment to desire is to be “like a man who has given up his wife” (Warren 376). When Edward complains that the stranger (Sir Reilly unnamed in Act One) has left him in the dark, Reilly again tries to lead him to the paradoxical realization that by admitting he knows nothing, he will gain knowledge: “There is no purpose in remaining in the dark/Except long enough to clear from the mind/The illusion of having ever been in the light” (309). But Reilly fails, and Edwards agrees to the conditions by which Lavinia will return, though it is unclear whether or not she has a similar choice.

Most scholars read the return of Lavinia and Reilly’s effort to “bring someone back from the dead” (329) as a parallel to Euripides’ Alcestis, in which Admetus loses his wife and has her restored to him by Heracles. Certainly, Eliot’s own claim of adaptation in “Poetry and Drama” cemented this as the definitive source material. But Eliot competing references suggest that the Alcestis myth is not the only myth at work here. When Edward objects to Reilly’s characterization of his wife returning from the dead (she has, he argues, only been gone for one day), Reilly responds that, “we die to each other daily./What we know of other people/
Is only our memory of the moments” (329). Compare this then with Harvey’s description of rebirth and karma:

That is, we are constantly changing during life, “reborn” as a “different” person according to our mood, the task we are involved in, or the people we are relating to. Depending on how we act, we may experience “heavenly” or “hellish” states of mind. (45)

Reilly’s suggestion that we die to each other daily does not evoke the miraculous return of the beloved in Euripides’ myth, but rather the more mundane event of continual renewal and rediscovery of ourselves in relationships. Moreover, such discoveries are rarely true insights, but more often simply the perception of our own imaginings. For Eliot, echoing Buddhist attachment and delusion, human relationships are merely repetitions of projections, not reawakenings or realizations.

This frustration is vividly portrayed by the failure of Edward and Lavinia once they are reunited. Edward is forbidden to ask Lavinia about her absence and she is forbidden to explain. Without obvious avenues of conversation, they quickly begin to bicker with one another. So unchanged are these two characters that Edward quickly concludes, “So here we are again. Back in the trap” (341). Soon after their reunion, Edward attempts to leave Lavinia, only to be more or less tricked into reconciliation with her in Sir Reilly’s office. If Edward and Lavinia have been reborn to each other, it is clearly not a Christian baptism, in which they are renewed, or born again, but a Buddhist rebirth in which they are condemned to repeat their lives once again. Although Lavinia states that “We are not to relapse into the kind of life we led” (34), that seems to be exactly what they do. Indeed, the couple seems profoundly caught between life cycles. While critics like Lesley Chamberlain claim that Edward and Lavinia’s “barren and dead marriage…is renewed and made fertile” (516), there is little evidence of this. At the end of the play, we find them ready to begin yet another cocktail party, the latest of several over two years. Lavinia has not left Edward again, but their relationship has not become more compatible, nor have they added anyone to their symbolic family, either child or friend, who might suggest renewal and growth. Perpetually caught between the beginning of the party and a longing for its end, Edward and Lavinia embody the kind of repetitive lifecycle that Buddhism seeks to escape. It is worth comparing Edward and
Lavinia's conclusion to the couple in "A Game of Chess." Both couples seem to exit under a time pressure ("HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" and "Now for the party") and both couples highlight the limitations of communication even within what should be the most intimate of relationships.

Although hardly an ideal relationship, at least one can admit that the Chamberlaynes have tried to change, which is more than can be said for Peter Quilpe, literally the "whelp" of the play. In addition to losing Celia and Lavinia, Peter is the antithesis of Buddhist enlightenment. If the highest level of enlightenment is "the absolutely real level, devoid of subject/object duality, in which knowledge is perfected due to directly knowing the world as representation only" (Harvey 111), then Peter, as a B-grade filmmaker, is at the lowest level. Whereas Celia is determined to see through the illusions of the world, Peter's goal is realistically to recreate the world as illusion. Absent from Act Two, Peter returns in Act Three as a location scout in search of the decayed mansion in England and "typically English faces" (377). His task confuses those at the cocktail reunion, especially Julia who wants to know why he can take a decrepit mansion to Hollywood, but not her (379). Peter carefully tries to explain that the actual manor house will not be moved, but merely recreated, and that the English faces he is sent to find will be images to recreate on, assumedly, American actors. At best, Peter recognizes his own futility, but to a degree far less than the other characters. Whereas Celia is overwhelmed by the illusions of the world, and Edward frustrated by his own metaphysical inaction, Peter bemoans his lack of career success: "I thought I had ideas to make a revolution/In the cinema, that no one could ignore—/But here I am, making a second-rate film!" (382).

This view of the cinema is consistent with some of Eliot's own stated views on film, which he attacked as "soul-destroying" (Qtd. Chinitz 53). Surprisingly, then, Eliot seems to suggest that the cinema may in fact be the key to Peter's enlightenment. Julia advises Peter to look at people as he looks at films, "That is, when you're not concerned with yourself/But just being an eye" (383). This loss of ego (an "eye" for an "I") might stem from the Buddhist teaching of the "not-self," a state in which "a person comes to see everything, all dhammas, as not-self, thereby destroying all attachment and attaining Nibb?na" (Harvey 52). Such sight is valued throughout the play—becoming simply an eye—as in the repetition of the one-eyed Riley and Julia's pair of glasses with one lens missing. That Peter, as a filmmaker, should inherit the one-eyed insight is logical, if surprising. When looking through the camera, the filmmaker closes the extra eye and similarly becomes one-eyed. The emphasis on the eye may further relate to the concept of the "Dhamma-eye," with which the Buddhist transcends illusion.

Peter gains no such enlightenment. Like the habitual film viewer, he remains in the dark, unaware even of his own ignorance. After his initial reaction to Celia's death, Peter remains silent for the remainder of the play, saying only brief good-byes at the end. Eliot once claimed that Act Three could be seen as an epilogue to the play, and the last few moments of the play certainly suggest this. Celia, the character most likely to achieve enlightenment, is absent, and the couple that might have been reborn demonstrates in the final moments that little, if anything, have changed. At the end, Edward cannot even satisfactorily pay Lavinia a compliment. The conclusion, as if to mock their efforts to resolve anything, ends with a beginning:

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.

CURTAIN (387)

While the verse structure here might effectively connect Lavinia and Edward, Eliot has clipped the lines, so that the echo deadens the verse line. One can imagine a slow pace to the repetition, in which the caesura of the complete line (split between two characters) becomes a gulf between two people. These are not lovers who finish each other's sentences, but almost strangers who endlessly repeat their empty exchanges, unable to see...
past them, or to invent new ones.

Such repetition, inspired by the tenets of Buddhism, differs from work by other modernist playwrights of repetition, like Gertrude Stein. The quality of the verse, remarked upon by virtually every critic of the play, calls attention to its own highly formalized and constructed nature of the verse—without flagrantly violating the veneer of realism. For critics like Michael Selmon, such formalized speech is intentionally self-referential dramatic dialogue that foregrounds language. But still others contend that the poetry is not exclusively verbal. As Denis Donoghue argues in The Third Voice: Modern British and American Verse Drama, "The 'poetry' of poetic drama is not necessarily or solely a verbal construct; it inheres in the structure of the play as a whole" (6). Despite numerous critical arguments to the contrary, Eliot himself did not believe that the language should be prominent in theatrical production. In his "Seneca in Elizabethan Tradition" (1927), he argued that the text was merely "a shorthand...a very abbreviated shorthand indeed, for the acted and felt play, which is always the real thing" (emphasis added, 7), and his attention to rewriting during rehearsals confirms at least his intentions. If anything, Eliot hoped to slip his poetry past a critical audience, by submerging it in the form of drawing-room comedy and realist drama, a goal similar to his assertion that great poetry could affect its audience before they necessarily understood it. His goal here, is less like that of Stein, who shocks her audience by radically detaching language from its presumed meaning, but rather like that of Bertolt Brecht, who invites his audience to see through the pretence of the stage to the material and social reality underneath.

Compare, briefly, Brecht's famous dictates regarding the actor and his role on stage in "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect," with Eliot's essay "John Marston." First Brecht:

The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them. He reproduces their remarks as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowl-

edge of men; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to a complete transformation. (137)

Similarly, Eliot affirms that,

It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once. In this it is different from allegory, in which the abstraction is something conceived, not something differently felt, and from symbolism (as in the plays of Maeterlinck) in which the tangible world is deliberately diminished—both symbolism and allegory being operations of the conscious planning mind. In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness; or the drama has an under-pattern, less manifest than the theatrical one. (173)

Certainly, the ideologies behind these essays are opposed, perhaps diametrically so. Whereas Brecht adopts a social and political agenda—to make the audience aware of material conditions outside the theatre and "to justify or abolish these conditions according to what class he belongs to" (139)—Eliot adopts a spiritual one, in which he wishes the audience to "see through the ordinary classified emotions of our active life into a world of emotion and feeling beyond" (Qtd. Moody 164). Although produced with different intentions, the effect on the stage might be remarkably similar. In other words, both Brecht and Eliot want their audiences to be aware of the production as theatre—a constructed fiction—while still retaining the vestiges of realism. In his essay on Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, Francis Fergusson described Eliot's dramatic action in terms shockingly similar to Brecht: "one may read [Murder in the Cathedral] as an imitation of that human action which we know from a thousand other sources" (emphasis added, 221). Like Brecht's theory of acting as quotation, Eliot's creation of performance as imitations of reality, creates precisely the same effect. Or, as W.B. Worthen observed, "poetic performance distinguished acting from the mere reproduction of social life [with] performances that inscribe the text with the priorities of meaning
latent in everyday behavior” (103). This juxtaposition encourages the audience to see through the performance as illusion, and indeed, to see beyond the theatre as the apparatus for illusion, to a larger reality that cannot be articulated on stage. For Brecht, the meaning in everyday behavior corresponded directly to the material reality outside the theatre, but for Eliot the use of realism in the theatre is a layer of illusion to see past. The social mechanics of the cocktail party are created for the audience, if not the characters, to transcend, just as Plato’s educational drinking parties were designed to help young men learn to transcend and master the effects of intoxication.

If Eliot’s stage presents the world of illusion as theatrical reality, his language disrupts the assumptions of realism and invites the audience to transcend the world of the stage. The use of verse in The Cocktail Party, then, is intended, to heighten not merely the audience’s awareness of language, but their awareness of the world (including what Brecht would call the “social gest”) as illusory and escapable. This critique of the modern world as illusory continues themes expressed in Eliot’s earlier poetry like The Waste Land and Prufrock, but engages dramatic action as a more tangible layer. The theatre itself becomes a place where the illusions of social behavior, so often taken for reality are exposed as empty performances.

To be sure, Eliot did not rely exclusively on the text’s hidden religious references to make this point. Throughout the play, characters constantly negotiate and debate the “real.” Sir Reilly attempts to help Edward learn “What you really are. What you really feel” (emphasis added, 307); Peter tells Edward that between him and Celia “There was something real,” but still wonders, “What is the reality/Of experience between two unreal people”. (316); and Celia complains to Edward that “Perhaps the dream was better. It seemed the real reality/And if this is reality, it is very like a dream” (324). Most characters lie, but this becomes an essential part of interaction. For example, Lavinia tells Edward, “Nothing less than the truth could deceive Julia” (337). People are described as projections (by Celia, pp. 327, 359; and by Edward, p. 342), and their realness is constantly debated. Lavinia tells Edward, “You must have been real/At some time or another” (341), while he complains of “the unreal-

ity/Of the role she had always imposed upon me” (349). Katherine Worth observes, “Eliot’s central characters suffer from a troubling sense of division between their real and their active selves,” but one must question her claim that, “Real’ self is a concept that still has force in his drama” (55). Given the constant lying, performing, and pretending throughout the play, it is impossible to know what is real. That one would search within the play for such a real self, is itself merely a symptom of the problem Eliot illuminates. In fact, such a search is inevitably fruitless in the theatre, since the real self of the character is neither the actor nor the text, but an odd and ephemeral combination of the two.

Eliot is no doubt aware of these semantic problems within theatrical representations, since he repeatedly juxtaposes the rhetoric of the real against self-reflexive comments on the theatre. The language of actors, roles, and performances presents a steady current throughout the text. In addition to Peter’s profession in Hollywood and Reilly’s pretense as an unknown stranger, Julia is identified as a mimic (298), Edward perceives himself surrounded by actors (307), Celia fades from Peter’s memory “like a film effect” (315), and Lavinia orders Edward to play another part (340). Edward, in turn, bemoans the role continually demanded by Lavinia. The accumulation of such language suggests that to be liberated, or enlightened, is to be beyond the realm of performance. In their failure for such liberation, Edward and Lavinia “can put on proper costumes/Or huddle quickly into new disguises” (367), while Celia has the opportunity to see beyond all previous roles. It is surely no coincidence that Celia’s death occurs off stage and between the acts, well beyond the reach of the performance at hand. She transcends the performance (even if the audience does not), and therefore concludes the play as a memory, an illusion. In a rare moment of insight, Lavinia recognizes that Peter’s memory of Celia is not authentic, but rather “an image of Celia” (382), and her observation might just as well apply to any sitting in the audience, for in fact, there never was a Celia, only an actress creating the image of the character.

Eliot’s theatrical manipulations are not unique to The Cocktail Party. In The Family Reunion, he describes the uncomfortable relationships among the
family members as those of “amateur actors who have not been assigned their part...Like amateur actors in a dream where the curtain rises, to find themselves dressed for a different play, or having rehearsed the wrong parts” (231). In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot repeatedly breaks the fourth wall of the performance, by having both Becket (in his sermon), and the knights directly address the audience. But in *The Cocktail Party*, the metaphor of the theatre is critical to the dramatic action. In fact, one can easily argue that the play is, what Lionel Abel called, metatheatre: “Metatheatre gives by far the stronger sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness,” and whereas “Tragedy...is our dream of the real...Metatheatre...is as real as are our dreams” (183).

In *The Cocktail Party*, the line between reality and representation is intentionally blurred, and character conflicts are almost always depicted in theatrical terms. Hugh Kenner, in his study, *The Invisible Poet*, summarized Eliot’s dramatic method thus: “we see only what is normally seen, and what is normally seen is an invention” (330). In other words, the stage becomes the space for life as performance.

In his desire to communicate to an audience, to put them on the same semantic footing as his characters, Eliot is undoubtedly an anomaly among modernist playwrights. As Martin Puchner has argued in his *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*, “The modernist critique of realism, mimesis, and literalism and its fixation on silent and solitary absorption are thus not independent values that happen to be at odds with what the theatre represents; they are barriers erected against the possibility of the public role of art suggested by the theatre” (11). It is certainly possible to read much of Eliot in such a context. For example, Kerry Kidd argues that Eliot’s distrust of an audience puts his cultural theory at odds with the modernist mass. According to Kidd, Eliot’s views on spectatorship “are akin to an invitation to audience voyeurism, inciting a passivity so total as to preclude even emotional involvement” (16). Kidd compares this mode of spectatorship to the courtroom, in which the spectators silently observe at a distance. To the courtroom, we might also add the spiritually enlightened audience.

As evidenced from the influence of Buddhism throughout the play, as well as the numerous Christian metaphors present, Eliot clearly conceives of an audience as a kind of community to be engaged rather than avoided. That he came to theatre through religious pageant plays may, in part, account for this, but many of his essays unrelated to religion argue for a broad community. In his unpublished lecture, “The Development of Shakespeare’s Voice,” Eliot articulates this desire:

> It is permissible and right to speak primarily to a small audience, if that audience has its organic place in society, if that audience is really representative of the most highly developed intelligence and sensibility of the people—but not an audience which has become completely cut off from the rest of society...It was the work of Shakespeare, more than any other writer, to appeal to every audience, and so to keep them cohering: to overcome the separation between the courtly group of Senecans, and the crowd at the fair. (Qtd. Moody, 364)

Taken in the context *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot advocates for the intellectual, spiritual development of an audience. The play, like the Dharma from which it takes its name, offers instruction, lessons to an audience willing to look for them within the theatre. In this context, dramatic poetry—disguised as realism—lies as the hidden truth behind the theatrical façade, waiting for the audience to uncover the “higher” meaning within a popular genre.

I am thus inclined to read Eliot’s play less as an example of Puchner’s anti-theatricality, than as evidence of what David E. Chinitz sees as ambivalence in Eliot’s writing. In his revisionist *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, Chinitz argues that “Eliot made poetry, indeed a career, out of an ambivalent sensitivity to the experiences of modern life” (10). This ambivalence manifests itself in Eliot’s theatre, in the material of performance, which aims both for entertainment and poetry, popularity and spiritual enlightenment, Christian salvation and Buddhist enlightenment. Jeffrey M. Perl and Andrew P. Tuck have argued that Eliot was initially drawn to the middle way between the real and the ideal in Bergson’s philosophy (120). I would suggest Eliot found the middle road (perhaps
the lesser doctrine) between the real and ideal on the stage. Neither reality nor illusion, the theatre offers a venue for both Eliot’s expression of cultural ambivalence and a place to engage others in his utopian look to the future. Like Brecht’s conception of the actor/character split, Eliot’s articulation of the theatre is a divided reality.

Unlike his fellow modernists, who attempted to create closet dramas in resistance to popular reception, Eliot’s goal was to uplift and even enlighten his audience. His simultaneous evocation of Greek, Christian, and Buddhist rituals functions to prevent the play from becoming too didactic, to ensure that the audience experienced the play and its illusions, rather than simply hearing a single spouted doctrine, or immersing themselves in the imaginary world of the play. Eliot’s audience for The Cocktail Party is invited to experience the illusion of the theatre thereby to practice the virtue of insight. His numerous letters on the subject suggest that he was pleased with the effect—and, as previously noted, he not only described the play as his greatest theatrical success thus far—but also seemed to enjoy this new source of fame. As he wrote to Djuna Barnes in 1950, “I’m beginning to wonder whether I am not perhaps a very ephemeral writer. Such publicity in a man’s lifetime seems to suggest eventual oblivion.”

Though Eliot has hardly drifted into oblivion, popularity for the play would not last. As early as 1968, Clive Barnes reflected that “At the time [of its Broadway Run], ‘The Cocktail Party’ was regarded as highly mysterious; today, the most mysterious thing about it is its earlier success” (42), and the scholarly commentary of the play turned sour by the mid-fifties and descended thereafter. Donoghue summarized the reception most succinctly when he wrote in 1959, “Most good poets write plays, bad plays” (10). Chinitz has argued that Eliot’s plays “were written off too quickly because...the Eliot who attempted to make a popular form of his art was not the Eliot his intellectual contemporaries wanted to see” (152), while Christopher Innes claims that Eliot’s plays “implicitly demonstrated that traditional poetry was incompatible with conventional theatre” (475). But it may be that Eliot’s spiritual, not poetic, aims exceeded the capabilities of the stage. Indeed, in “Poetry and Drama,” Eliot describes the goal of poetic drama as a transformation worthy of Antonin Artaud:

I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order...To go as far in this direction as it is possible to go, without losing that contact with the ordinary everyday world with which drama must come to terms, seems to me the proper aim of dramatic poetry. For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation. (43-44)

Eliot’s appropriation of the material of the theatre—sets, costumes, props—is only to bring his audience to this condition of serenity. Such a condition is not unlike Buddhist enlightenment, which too must be achieved by living in the coarse reality of existence and transcending that apparent reality. Just as Eliot studied Bergson’s philosophy and the Buddhist doctrine for the middle way, he may have used the theatre as a connection between the ideal expressed in poetic dialogue and the physical reality of the stage. Indeed, the limitations of the stage afforded Eliot the opportunity to critique the veracity of the stage image. In a play in which nearly all of the characters represent the self-centered obstacles to true understanding, acting virtuosity serves primarily to accentuate the limitations of the stage, and by extension belief in the material world as real. For Eliot, theatre offers audiences the opportunity to grasp the play both as an aesthetic object and as a transformative experience in which the limitations of “reality” be perceived and transcended.

In hindsight, one can only conclude that Eliot’s attempt failed. Poetic experiment continued on mid-twentieth stages in the subtle poetic inflections of Tennessee Williams’ The Glass Menagerie (1952), the influence of Greek myth in Arthur Miller’s tragedies of the common man, and as pastiche in plays like Caryl Churchill’s Serious Money (1987), to name only a few examples. But the poetic realization Eliot calls
for in "Poetry and Drama" never emerged on stage. Instead, the experience of world as illusion that Eliot hoped to articulate in The Cocktail Party surfaced on cinema screens (most notably in the French New Wave), while his "condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation," became rapidly incompatible with the culture of the Cold War, television, and nuclear arms. Yet, one might imagine that Eliot is aware of the futility of his drama given that, in terms of Buddhist enlightenment, virtually everyone seems destined to repeat the process of attachment, desire, and suffering once again. Perhaps the lesser doctrine to which Eliot’s esoteric title refers, is faith in the theatre itself as transformative experience; an attachment and a desire for illusion that one may be better to live without, but that Eliot could not transcend.

Notes
2. This was the title of the manuscript that Eliot submitted to his collaborator, British director E. Martin Browne. See Browne. Dated January 22, 1950, an unnamed newspaper also reported that, "The original title for T.S. Eliot's 'The Cocktail Party' was 'One-Eyed Reilly', was taken from a song in the play. Presumably, and to the distress of its press agent, Dick Many, it was ditched as unbecoming a play in verse." The Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library.
3. Translations and interpretations of Sanskrit text are derived from Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary. I am also indebted to Eliza Kent for her assistance with translation.
4. For the purposes of this essay, I refer almost exclusively to Warren and Babbitt's translations of Buddhist texts, since both were available to Eliot at the time of his playwriting, and there is evidence he was familiar with both texts from his studies at Harvard. For more on Eliot’s education in Buddhism at Harvard, see Kearns.
5. It is possible that Eliot draws the title of "guardian" for these secondary characters from Plato's The Laws. In his translation of The Laws, Treavor J. Saunders describes the guardians, thus: "The Auxiliary Guardians assist their University Presbyter collegues in administration and keeping order, and undertake the defence [sic] of the state" (25). Further, it is worth noting that in Saunders’ translation, the second section of Book One is entitled, "Drinking Parties as an Educational Device" (63), a possible source for Eliot’s final title.
6. Herbert Knust suggests that there may be a connection between the name "Kinkanjia" and Celia’s concern with “kinks.” See Knust, p. 295.
7. For more on the parallels between Euripides Acestis and The Cocktail Party, see Heilman and Rockford.
8. In an early version of the play, Reilly reports to Julia that the Chamberlaynes, "accept the wheel" (Browne 186). This is perhaps further reference to the "Dhamma-wheel" (Harvey 23). Eliot later changed the line to "They accept their destiny" (368), but Browne never explains this change.
9. In fact, according to Eliot’s letter to E. Martin Browne on July 18, 1948, Eliot described the original draft of the play as "three acts and an 'epilogue,'" although at the time he had decided to call the final act simply Act IV (Browne 173).
10. E. Martin Browne’s account of his numerous collaborations with Eliot attest to Eliot’s interest in revising, often according to the theatrical opinion of Browne, and occasionally, to the publicizing interests of producer Henry Sherek. Eliot offered the following advice to Barnes in a letter dated March 20, 1956: "I have always found myself that a good many of the play's defects of my plays remain invisible to me until I see them on the stage. With my last two plays, I have done a considerable amount of rewriting actually during the rehearsals, some of it in the theatre itself, and THE COCKTAIL PARTY in particular, I altered very considerably, especially the last act, after the production in Edinburgh." Djuna Barnes Papers. Archives and Manuscripts. University of Maryland.
11. Additional references to the theatre were cut from the final version of the play. Perhaps the most interesting of these is Edward’s accusation to Lavinia, "You wished to be the centre [sic]/Not only the producer, but the leading lady./Well, I played my part as a useful background" (Browne 206).
13. Eliot's use of the theatre further recalls Georg Simmel's 1917 essay, "The Handle," in which Simmel argued that an aesthetic object could simultaneously fulfill the dual purpose of a "pure" work of art and a functional object.

Works Cited


Heilman, Robert B. "Alcestis and the Cocktail Party" Comparative Literature 5.2 (Spring 1953): 105-116.


