CHAPTER 5

From Agamemnon to Herakles
Eliot's Plays and the Four Quartets

> I can guess about the past and what you mean about the future;
> But a present is missing, needed to connect them.
> (Eliot, *The Family Reunion*, *CPP* 272)

In "Sweeney among the Nightingales," Sweeney is cast as a modern-day Agamemnon; *Sweeney Agonistes* has an epigraph not from the *Agamemnon* but from *The Libation Bearers*, the next play in the Aeschylean trilogy, and maintains Sweeney as a still vulgar but now more spiritually aware figure, perhaps under the influence of Milton's Samson; and finally, having rerouted the *Agamemnon* through English history in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot completes the trilogy with *The Family Reunion*'s recasting of *The Eumenides* in 1939. Eliot's progression through Aeschylus resonates with his intellectual and poetic development: He quickly moves from Agamemnon's potentially "unjust" and unbefitting slaying at the hands of his wife – the collapse of the paternal figure read perhaps as symbolic of the unmooring of the modern world – to the more properly Eliotic question of Agamemnon's son's guilt for having avenged him by murdering his mother. This is a question broached as early as "Eeldrop and Appleplex," where murder is discussed as something "done which cannot be undone," and, after being translated in these general terms, as "a possibility which none of us realize until we face it ourselves" (*CP* 1, 527). Orestes has crossed a similar "frontier," committing what seemed like a necessary or inevitable act that he nonetheless understands was unethical (ibid., and see also *CP* 5, 381). He thus embodies – or can be made to embody – humanity's original sin. Eliot's staging of *The Eumenides* in a secular, somewhat familiar world acts on two fronts to restore the broken temporal chain referred to in the passage quoted in my epigraph: First, it allows him to create unstated but obvious parallels to the Christian doctrine with which his audience has lost touch but which could be reactivated, and second, it suggests that given that the same parallels could be found in the distant Hellenic world,

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a claim could be made for their universal validity. He reactivates the past (Aeschylus) through the present (interwar England, with its morally decaying upper class) in order to secure the future (temporal and eternal) for his presumably broader and somewhat less privileged theatrical audience.

Eliot uses *The Family Reunion* to transition from the solitary and intentionally difficult/private "Burnt Norton," published for the first time in his 1936 *Collected Poems*, to the rest of the *Four Quartets*, which were written during the Second World War in a more communal spirit – indeed, conceived as Eliot's own contribution to the war effort.[1] In this chapter I explore *The Family Reunion*'s specific resonances in the *Quartets* and trace the structural and philosophical connections between the two works more broadly, before then showing the transformation of both play and poems in Eliot's *Cocktail Party* (1949), his version of Euripides' *Alcestis*. Rather than focus on parallels between Eliot's plays and their Greek prototypes (which have been ably traced),[2] I examine the theoretical questions that prompt Eliot's approach and that tie the plays together with his last major poetic work; I thus outline significant aspects of his late poetics which surprisingly depend on his treatment of Greek materials, showing how they bring to a close his first foray into such materials in the late 1910s/early 1920s. Just as in "Nightingales" the *Agamemnon* was used to think about the relation of past to present, so in *The Family Reunion* and some of the quartets Aeschylus is philosophically central to Eliot's articulation not only of a historically minded aesthetics, but of poetry's sociopolitical and religious utility. Eliot is ultimately interested in establishing commonality beyond specificity, using Greek or English words, symbols, and patterns in order to point to the significant Word of God. But, to achieve it, he has to leave Aeschylus's too-Greek world behind in favor of a Seneca-influenced understanding of Euripides, and in particular of Euripides' Herakles in the *Alcestis*. This chapter thus follows the development of Eliot's programmatic use of increasingly distant reading, and of his implicit argument for *not* translating Greek.

The evolution of Eliot as a dramatist can be mapped onto his thinking about Greek, as seen, for instance, in his portrayal of the relationship between the individual and the community. Jones suggests that the "exceptional person" is gradually moved away from the center of Eliot's

[1] As he repeatedly tells Emily Hale during the composition of "The Dry Salvages" (e.g., December 10, 1940; all letters to Hale referred to here and below can be found at https://tseliot.com/the-eliot-hale-letters/letters and are the copyright of the Estate of T. S. Eliot).

[2] For example, most recently, Hiscock, "Reception Theory," convincingly argues that *The Family Reunion* reflects "in compressed and refracted form" the *Oresteia* in its entirety (331).

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plays: from the literal saint Thomas Becket in *Murder* to the Orestean Harry ("still in the centre of the picture, but it is a family portrait") to Celia, who is entirely on the side in *The Cocktail Party*, until finally in the last two plays, *The Confidential Clerk* (1954; based on the *Ion*) and *The Elder Statesman* (1959; based on *Oedipus at Colonus*), there are almost no exceptional people at all, and to the extent that we may find them, they are "much more closely integrated in the pattern of ordinary life."[3] Similarly, though the Greek paradigm remains for all the plays, it is pointed at less and less; it increasingly becomes a structure of living, with Eliot in effect producing a kind of play he would have been very skeptical of in 1920.[4] As Eliot feels more comfortable moving further away from his prototype, keeping, for example, only the vaguest sense of the grove of the Eumenides at the end of *The Elder Statesman*,[5] the quintessential Eliotic gap between what is to be communicated or known and the receiver of such a message seems to close: from Sweeney's exasperation that he has "to use words when I talk to you" and Harry's inability to communicate both his predicament and his calling to *The Elder Statesman*, where "the limits of expression and understanding are seen to be transcended by love" in the relationship of father and daughter.[6]

At this new juncture of modernist hellenism in the 1940s and 50s, moreover, Eliot, Pound, and H.D. each recognize and meaningfully engage with the others' Greek work, albeit less overtly than in the 1910s, and it is that unrecognized story that the next chapters will tell. Continuing to address the poetic and cultural problems that he had discussed with Pound during the early period of their collaboration – problems to which they were both returning in the mid- to late 1930s, albeit in different ways – such as the question of belief or ritual in relation to poetry and drama, or the possibility of building a community through poetic, and specifically metrical language, Eliot offers a different pathway for the relation not just to Greek but to antiquity *tout court*, to which Pound will then respond in his own postwar Greek plays. Though stemming from the opposite impulse

[3] *Plays of T. S. Eliot*, 124, 166, 192.

[4] Van Boheemen, "Old Possum at Colonus," 121, even argues for the influence of the formerly despised Gilbert Murray on Eliot's last play.

[5] Jones, *Plays of T. S. Eliot*, 157, argues that the plots of *The Confidential Clerk* and the *Ion* are more clearly aligned than in Eliot's previous Greek plays, but "the translation into modern terms is more complete." Yet Arrowsmith, "Menander and Milk Wood," 291, finds the play "closer to Menander than to Euripides." On *The Elder Statesman*'s echoes of *Oedipus at Colonus*, see the contemporary review by Worsley, "Mr Eliot at Colonus," and the more extensive account by Van Boheemen, "Old Possum at Colonus."

[6] *P* 125; Jones, *Plays of T. S. Eliot*, 195.

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and following a completely distinct transposition strategy, Pound's *Elektra* "fails" for ultimately similar reasons that Eliot's *Family Reunion* does – a lack of "adjustment" between Greek and English. Having learned the same lesson, both poets have better luck with their Herakles plays. *The Cocktail Party* and *Women of Trachis* are again the products of opposing views and strategies – one "modern," the other "primitivist." Still, Pound recalls Eliot's earlier work on ritual, and is influenced and inspired by Eliot's Senecan Herakles in "Little Gidding" IV for his own version of the hero in the climax of *Women of Trachis*. Eliot's *Cocktail Party*, on the other hand, may have its kernel in another, more unexpected source: H.D.[7] I suggest in the second part of this chapter that the specific presentation of his psychiatrist Herakles in *The Cocktail Party*, as well as the play's setup, may well have been inspired by H.D.'s own account of her analysis with Freud, published only two years before Eliot began work on the play. As Eliot moves further away from Aeschylean stylization to something like Euripidean realism, his next tragic stop will be the *Ion*; this additionally hints at some attunement to H.D.'s work as well, and to the strong case she had made almost twenty years earlier for the play's modern significance.

Reuniting with Aeschylus: The Quest for a Common Language

Eliot's serious turn to the theater in the late 1930s is the next stage in his search for impersonality, now more morally tinged as theater becomes fully subsumed into Eliot's type of ascetic Christianity: "Our perfect verse actor … will have to be something of a hero and an ascetic, if not a martyr," he writes in 1938's "The Future of Poetic Drama" (*CP* 5, 655). The same goes for the poet-turned-dramatist, who "needs to acquire a good deal of humility" but hopefully in the process undergo "a certain moral purification" (656). Theater is no longer only a ritual for the audience who, ideally, will imaginatively participate in the events onstage, but a cleansing for the author himself, who learns to give up his "I" and everything he loves in his own writing (per the quotation from St. John of the Cross used in *Sweeney Agonistes*), as if in penance for having been, despite his best efforts at impersonality, a personal poet. So Eliot recalls removing "first-rate" passages because "they are my poetry and not that of my character who speaks them" (656). "Burnt Norton" arises from such discarded, too-"personal" lines intended for *Murder in the Cathedral*, lines

[7] Similarly, Hiscock, "Reception Theory," 331–32, briefly discusses Eliot's indebtedness in *The Family Reunion* to H.D.'s approach to Greek.

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then re-articulated dialogically and embedded in a larger social world in *The Family Reunion*. But it's not until *The Cocktail Party* that Eliot succeeds, in his mind, in abiding by "the ascetic rule" to "avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility" (*CP* 7, 601). As William Arrowsmith puts it in a brief but incisive review of *The Confidential Clerk*, Eliot's late plays show a "great poet … systematically and humbly stripping away his *glossolalia*," his ability to speak in a variety of tongues.[8]

On Not Translating Greek in "Burnt Norton"

The question that animates Eliot's work in this period is encapsulated in the two epigraphs from Heraclitus that he used first for "Burnt Norton" and then for the *Quartets* as a whole:[9] τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν and ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὠυτή. Eliot had translated them thus in his college notes: "Though the law of things is universal in scope, ordinary people live as if they had their own insight" and "the way up and the way down are the same."[10] Both quotations touch on unity and/in difference, on the individual and the pattern – the first in a social/anthropological perspective, the second in a processual or formal one. The *Quartets* constantly think about how to make space for singularity within the "pattern," but also about the possibility of reframing the "pattern" positively, as a blessing rather than a curse. This issue is intertwined with the use of the past in the present, both historically and religiously: the possibility of positive, aware life in a fallen world in which we ourselves cannot be saints.[11]

Despite the commonality of *logos* (translated as "law" above) that the first Heraclitean phrase seems to imply, Eliot appears invested, at first glance paradoxically, in both phrases' untranslatability.[12] As early in the composition process as January 13, 1936, he has decided on using these epigraphs in an untranslated Greek – they replace an earlier quotation from Shelley's "Epipsychidion" – fully aware that they "make the poem

[8] "Menander and Milk Wood," 294. See Jones, *Plays of T. S. Eliot*, *passim*, on Eliot's dramatic progression towards realism and the consequent thinning of his poetic language.

[9] The epigraphs were initially published with "Burnt Norton" in 1936, but were not included in its republication as a separate pamphlet in the early 1940s; they were later recast as epigraphs to the entirety of the *Quartets*.

[10] Quoted in Crawford, *Young Eliot*, 172.

[11] The distinction between the "saints" and the "rest of us" is one that Eliot hasn't quite hit upon in "Burnt Norton" or in *The Family Reunion*, but it makes its way from the "Dry Salvages" into the very structure of *The Cocktail Party*, with the two paths presented: Celia's ending in a literal (if parodic) crucifixion and Edward and Lavinia's ending in a proper cocktail party.

[12] See Brooker, *Eliot's Dialectical Imagination*, 66–67, on Eliot's untranslated epigraphs as "survivals."

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more difficult to understand than it would be without them."[13] He would later explain that "The reasons for presenting [the quotations] in the original Greek is that it preserves their delightful obscurity. Any translation must be a personal interpretation and I had no wish to interpret" (*P* 906). In particular, "the word Logos is almost untranslateable": "It may mean reason or explanation or it may mean word in the sense which was developed for the first chapter of St. John" (906, 907). Eliot did propose several translations in his correspondence, most of which maintain *logos* in Greek: for example, "Although the Logos is common the majority of men live as if they had an individual understanding" (907). His first recorded translation of the epigraph, written by hand on an annotated typescript of the poem sent to Emily Hale in early 1936, is more revealing of Eliot's preoccupations at that time, since it brings up impersonality: "Although the LOGOS is universal and impersonal, most people go on living as if each one could have his own private philosophy of life."[14] Despite his caveats, though, he seems quite certain in how he understands the quotation:

> Herakleitos meant a great deal more than simply "the word is in common use." I think he meant rather that the reason, the Logos, or the rational understanding of the nature of things is common or available to all men. Most people live as if they had a peculiar and individual insight. (*P* 906)

The second epigraph doesn't pose a translation problem. Its rendering, claims Eliot, is "perfectly straightforward: 'the way up and the way down are the same'" (907). But the interpretation problem remains: "as to what Heraclitus meant by it, that is a very different matter" (907). So, like Woolf, Eliot preserves the Greek as a kind of talisman of untranslatability, inviting a variety of interpretations. At the same time, even the most minimal understanding of the fragments' content suggests that all of those ways of comprehending will lead to a "sameness" and are underwritten by a "common logos," just as, materially speaking, all interpretations arise and come back to the same eighteen Greek words. This common *logos* or *Logos* will guarantee that our processes of groping will be mutually comprehensible even if our personal results diverge. We can then see beyond the apparent contradiction that the epigraphs' non-translation produces: Their treatment by the poet comports with the interpretive avenue Eliot wishes his readers to take when faced with the *Quartets*. It also speaks to the poems' theological aspiration

[13] Letter to Hale.

[14] The annotated "Burnt Norton" proofs were placed in the archive with Eliot's letter from March 24, 1936 (Emily Hale Letters from T. S. Eliot, C0686 [Box 6, Folder 6], Manuscripts Division, Department of Special Collections, Princeton University Library); however, they may well have been sent earlier, since on March 19 he responds to Hale's comments on the poem as a whole.

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towards universal truth – the word as the Word, which would promise translatability even in the face of apparent lack of translation – while also recognizing the difficulties inherent in that ambition.

The question is not a new one for Eliot, of course. Already "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" dramatizes it, both in Prufrock's exasperated "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" and in the misunderstanding of his potential grand statement that he foresees: "'That is not what I meant at all'" (*P* 8). One of the thunder's instructions at the end of *The Waste Land* is "*Dayadhvam*" 'sympathize,' necessary because "We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison" (*P* 70). The poem's multilingual conclusion could be seen as an attempt, if not to bridge, at least to dissolve the bars of the individual linguistic prisons under the banner of "peace that passeth understanding" (*P* 77). In *Sweeney Agonistes*, Sweeney laments that "I've gotta use words when I talk to you" (*P* 125), a statement reiterated by Harry, the Orestes figure in *Family Reunion*: "This is what matters, but it is unspeakable, / Untranslatable: I talk in general terms / Because the particular has no language" (*CPP* 235). In contrast, Agatha, the Athena stand-in, holds out hope for communication despite the difficulty identified: "Talk in your own language, without stopping to debate / Whether it may be too far beyond our understanding" (235). This is what Eliot does in the *Quartets*.

"Burnt Norton" suggests that art, and especially poetry, "words," offers the best way towards comprehending the paradoxical time it wants to explore. The poem's gambit, as later that of *The Family Reunion*, is to "realize" "what might have been," to make it more than "abstraction," and accept that though "Time past and time future … Point to one end, which is always present," human life does not have to be merely a "waste sad time / Stretching before and after" that eternally present moment (*P* 179, 180, 184). It does so not through direct statement ("the particular has no language"), but by creating a structure of experience through and between the words, as in the awkward juxtaposition of "time time" in "Only through time time is conquered" (*P* 181), or in the poem's opening:

> Footfalls echo in the memory
> Down the passage which we did not take
> Towards the door we never opened
> Into the rose-garden. My words echo
> Thus, in your mind.
> But to what purpose
> Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
> I do not know. (*P* 179)

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The line break emphasizes the performativity of Eliot's "Thus" – less a syllogistic "ergo" and more of an analogical deictic here. The way that his written words reverberate in the reader's mind is posited as similar (or even identical) to the statement preceding; they tangibly recreate what did not happen to us but happened to him (in thought). So, the past is available for imaginative reliving, whose value, the next few lines suggest, may not need to be purposeful or strictly intellectual. If we enter a literary text, we are already familiar with the conception of time and space Eliot is proposing, where what is or was not nonetheless is. The image of the "bowl of rose-leaves" emphasizes the importance of this "artificiality": It is not the roses in the (already artificial) rose-garden that are accessed, but the trace of nature as plucked, selected, and even more artificially "set" in a bowl. What is reawakened – perhaps ominously ("disturbed") – is a forgotten ("dust") or passé artistic pattern; the memory of an old construct is being revisited and renewed as we re-enter this old house ("Burnt Norton") and mind (Eliot's/the speaker's). The seeds are thus planted for the return to the house of Atreus.

In the poem's fifth and final section, Eliot develops this idea of the privileged access a four-dimensional art may provide to the philosophical questions at the poem's heart through the examples of "words," "music," and "a Chinese jar" (*P* 183). All of these are both moving – in that they unfold in time, whether in actualization (music) or perception/reception (jar from distant epoch/place) or both – and "still" because of "the form, the pattern": the form which they embody qua artistic objects and the cultural or historical patterns to which they contribute and in which they participate (183). Eliot's very word "still," oft repeated here, encapsulates the process. It is grammatically multifunctional: an adverb, adjective, verb, and noun. It suggests both immobility and continuity of action; it can operate as both a spatial and a temporal marker; and it can be used to signify both agreement or intensification of a quality (emphasis) and opposition. "Still" is a condensation of the Heraclitean epigraph ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὠυτή. On a larger scale, Eliot gathers up in this section all of the rhetorical modes previously employed in the poem: religious, philosophical, imagistic, confessional/discursive, and literary or self-referential (insofar as specific images and turns of phrase from earlier parts of this poem return). They are all still here, still in use, and yet the poem is not still, jumping as it does from one to the next, stopping itself before it brings any train of thought to a conclusion:

> Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,
> Not that only, but the co-existence,
> Or say that the end precedes the beginning (183)

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Moments like these work to preserve a certain openness of interpretation, a certain opacity. As in the poem's beginning, the form of the syllogism belies its promise of reason, turns into something else, collapses.[15] This is a strategy on Eliot's part, as his letter to Hale about the use of Heraclitus strongly suggests and further letters to her confirm:[16] to get his readers if not to a common conclusion, at least to an experience of thinking together, rather than retreating "each in his prison" of definitive interpretation (or to the poet's own). As with the epigraphs, the act of not conclusively "translating," of not letting a reading truly settle, is what helps him do it. The object (the Heraclitean fragments, Eliot's own lines) remains there still, like the jar; what it may "contain" is moving because it is what we make of it, over time. But that process of construction, contradictory as it might be, is common, is the one way.

I have lingered on "Burnt Norton" because I see Eliot's return to theater and specifically to the *Oresteia* after the poem's composition as a way of enacting and thus impersonalizing the "principles" articulated in the poem, which was not yet at that time the first of a series, whose pattern hadn't yet become *the* pattern for a long poem. *The Family Reunion* allows Eliot to properly approach the issue broached by his first Heraclitean epigraph by presenting some kind of community of individuals who appear to be at odds – it could thus be said to lead him to conceive of and construct the ever widening world of the *Quartets* themselves. Indeed, as Eliot works on the play in early 1937, he thinks of it exactly in the terms of the "pattern" contemplated in "Burnt Norton": He wants to write his characters in such a way "as to give pattern to the group, suggesting a kind of musical analogy – so that each has his part to play like an instrument in a small orchestra," he tells Hale.[17] (In his postmortem of the play in spring 1939, he would admit that he got the "musical pattern right, but allowed it to dominate the action pattern too much.")[18] The indebtedness of the remaining quartets to *The Family Reunion* has often been noted in passing, not least by Eliot himself.[19] Here I will examine the specific role that thinking through the *Eumenides* and through *The Family Reunion's* particular failures and successes plays in the philosophical development of the poems, as well as the relevance of Greek (non-)translation.

[15] See also Abbott, "Eliot's Ghostly Footfalls," 366.
[16] He returns to the poem's "obscurity" multiple times (e.g., on February 17, and on March 5, 1936), insisting on the necessity of this strategy (March 19, 1936).
[17] February 23, 1937.
[18] Letter to Hale; April 14, 1939.
[19] See Gardner, *Art of T. S. Eliot*, 129, 156–57, and *Composition*, 4.

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S(h)ifting Aeschylus in The Family Reunion

The long-suspected indebtedness of "Burnt Norton" to Eliot's rekindled romance with Emily Hale is confirmed by their correspondence, but Hale, an actress and theater teacher, simultaneously inspires Eliot to turn once again to drama. Greek drama and "Burnt Norton" are intertwined in his late 1935 to early 1936 letters that record the poem's composition. These letters reveal the degree to which Eliot very deliberately thought about the use of Greek prototypes in the late 1930s, assessing both his own earlier effort with the *Agamemnon* and other Greek-inspired plays that he saw on the London stage during that time. Their correspondence throughout February and March 1936 features his frank assessment of his dramatic work to date. Apropos of criticism by a Miss Gilman apparently brought up by Hale, he discusses extensively the indebtedness of *Murder in the Cathedral* to *Agamemnon*. At first he defends the play by pointing to the merits of its chorus; he insists the arrangement of the latter is "not Greek," and admits that "I am not a good enough Greek scholar" and thus could not imitate Aeschylean prosody.[20] However, he is still committed to improving his work: "Very likely there is a better form of chorus to be devised."[21] (Of course, *The Family Reunion*'s multiple attempts at such a formalist/ritualist element, a *sine qua non* for drama for the early Eliot, would eventually convince him to take the opposite path from then on, and work towards eliminating the chorus instead.) Having connected the purported obscurity of *Murder* to that of "Burnt Norton,"[22] he returns to Miss Gilman three weeks later. After the intervening letters in which he explicates "Burnt Norton" to Hale, he seems to have had a change of heart: "the criticism that I followed the Agamemnon too closely is justified."[23] Indeed, as I will argue more fully below, "Burnt Norton" provides guidance as to how to enter the house of Atreus with an eye to the future rather than to the past. The very pattern of the rose-garden passage in the poem's opening – which recurs in *The Family Reunion* – aligns with Eliot's developing conceptualization of the tragic: "In some plays," he claims, "the tragic aspect is enhanced by one's thinking of what the person or persons might have been in different circumstances."[24]

[20] February 19, 1936, and March 5, 1936.
[21] March 5, 1936.
[22] Ibid.
[23] March 26, 1936.
[24] As opposed to tragedy being wholly due to character rather than circumstances as well. December 16, 1937.

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In contrast, Greek-inspired plays on the London stage function as counterexamples for Eliot.[25] After attending a performance of the *Agamemnon* (in Louis MacNeice's otherwise admired translation), he tells Hale on November 9, 1936, that he is now convinced "that Greek drama simply can't be put on the modern stage – half modernised and half fake antique (not the traditional fake antique of Praxiteles and Winckelmann but the equally fake antique of Cretan art – why Cretan)." Dissatisfied with the two primary modes of hellenism available – the purist and the primitivist – Eliot becomes increasingly confident in his own strategy of using Greek paradigms but ever more obscurely,[26] and gets to it with some haste. By early March 1937, he proudly announces to Hale that he has written four pages of his new play. After completing a draft of *The Family Reunion* in late November of that year, he reports on Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. His assessment of O'Neill's play's "Greekness" is telling for his conceptualization of his own efforts at exactly the same time. MacNeice's *Agamemnon* may have been too Greek (or at least too obviously mediated by a particular vision of "Greek"), but O'Neill's play isn't Greek enough. *Mourning* has a "simple Greek shell," Eliot explains to Hale, whose extent can be exhausted by reading a one-page summary of the *Oresteia*.[27] By comparison, he continues, "in so far as my play is 'Greek' it starts from the opposite end, or from the inside rather than the outside," with the only outward sign of Greekness being the presence of the Furies. The connection, that is, isn't one of surface – whether plot-based as in O'Neill or linguistic as in MacNeice – but one of depth, a more essential kinship. What O'Neill's play is missing, moreover, by only externally following Aeschylus is "the Greek sense of the nature of crime and punishment"; Eliot's acute perception of this sense will inform both the way he follows and the way he departs from the *Eumenides*.

While "Burnt Norton" allows Eliot to consider the question of pattern mostly philosophically, through propositions, examples, and enactments that are fundamentally not historical, it is its transposition into the somewhat more concrete and more historically – because textually – rooted setting of *The Family Reunion* that suggests the greater earthly intimacy of "East Coker." *The Family Reunion* enables him to think at once about the religious or moral problem – the necessary pattern of sinfulness – and the

[25] See also Hiscock, "Reception Theory," 332–4.
[26] Indeed, before *The Family Reunion* has even opened, Eliot tells Hale that it was a "tactical blunder to have allowed the Greek analogy to be emphasized" (March 31, 1939).
[27] December 16, 1937; all quotations in this paragraph are from this letter.

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historical issues that had so occupied him earlier in his career: the pattern of literary history, of tradition and the individual talent. It is in these terms that Eliot would later speak of the play's twofold failure. First, Harry is an "insufferable prig"; that is, he does not provide an adequate model for ethical/moral action, and it is in fact his mother who is the more sympathetic figure, "the only complete human being in the play" (*CP* 7, 601). The play's "deepest flaw," however, is its "failure of adjustment between the Greek story and the modern situation" (*CP* 7, 600). Because of these missteps, *The Family Reunion* fails to fulfill the purpose of theater in the present time of "chaotic … religious and ethical beliefs" (*CP* 3, 402). On the one hand, it does not function as a platform for the "social 'usefulness'" of poetry (*CP* 4, 691), because it doesn't quite manage to bring poetry "into the world in which the audience lives" (*CP* 7, 598). On the other, it also doesn't fully "tend in the direction of liturgy," which would counterbalance worldly chaos (*CP* 3, 402). Where *Murder in the Cathedral* may have succeeded quite literally in terms of the latter and may have tried to enter the world where the audience lives through a Brechtian (or Aristophanic) breaking of the fourth wall but "failed" because of its limited reach (an explicitly Christian-themed play performed in the context of a Christian festival), *The Family Reunion* fails in its ritual, community-building function.

A ritual is a repetition in the present of what has happened already as if it is happening anew – and it is the nature of ritual that it will keep happening. In Jane Harrison's words, a ritual is "a thing *re*-done or *pre*-done, a thing enacted or represented"; it is commemorative or anticipatory.[28] This is literal for Aeschylus in *The Eumenides*. He dramatizes the founding of an institution that at the moment of performance already exists: What is presented onstage is both the past (it's already happened) and, within the confines of the play itself, contains the future (the Athenian judicial system, which is actually Aeschylus's present). This confluence of times occurs textually for Eliot. His play in the present retells Aeschylus's, so it has already happened as well, but it simultaneously detects (or encodes), if only barely, a Christian future in *The Eumenides* which Aeschylus could not have foreseen.

Crucially, the relation of present and past is what both plays are about: What bearing should a past deed have on the future, they ask. Should it be partially justified and repressed for the sake of an endless movement

[28] *Themis*, 43; italics in original. On Eliot and ritual, see, most recently, Brooker, *Eliot's Dialectical Imagination*, ch. 4.

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forward, as Apollo tells Orestes,[29] and as Eliot's chorus of aunts and uncles desire when they plead, "any explanation will satisfy: / We only ask to be reassured / About the noises in the cellar" (*CPP* 243)? Is absolution ready to hand, as Apollo argues in Orestes' trial or as Harry's uncle Charles asserts ("Your conscience can be clear") when Harry suggests that he pushed his wife overboard (236)? Or is the past "irredeemable," as the haunted Harry says when he first appears (234, 256)? This would imply that "all past is present … always present" and that, therefore, one will be forever punished, hunted down by the Furies (234). Can there be a reconciliation of the two? Much like Athena, the *Family Reunion*'s Agatha suggests that the answer is yes: "We must try to penetrate the other private worlds / of make-believe and fear. To rest in our own suffering / Is evasion of suffering" (268). Though presented in very different terms, the solution in both cases lies with the transformation of the individual case or "sin" into a communal affair.

The Family Reunion returns to the issues raised by "Sweeney among the Nightingales" around historical pattern and considers them more seriously, because they have now acquired a cosmic and religious tint. Indeed, Harry makes this connection explicit upon stepping onstage. After uttering the Aeschylean "*You* don't see them, but I see them," he uses the earlier poem's concluding imagery to suggest that it is part of the same spiritual journey: He acknowledges that he "knew they were coming" since "In Italy, from behind the nightingale's thicket, / The eyes stared at me, and corrupted that song" (232).[30] The reliance solely on the artistic or aesthetic in "Nightingales" is now complicated as Eliot lingers on the process that leads from murder to potential regeneration (or further decay) instead of simply presenting it as a fait accompli. In "Nightingales" the action inside was moved outside as if to an outdoor theater. In *The Family Reunion*, Orestes–Harry's pursuit and "trial" do not, on the one hand, take place outside, at the holy places of Delphi and the Areopagus, but inside the family home; on the other, though, the Eumenides themselves are the outside figures looking in and aiming to pull Harry out. The solution they are presumed to represent is never fully clarified on our stifling set except as the conscious, unblinkered decision to leave it – the same act performed by the man in mocha brown in "Nightingales." Yet being "out" is not as simple here. At his most Orestean, Harry declares

[29] Lines 74, 78–79.

[30] An April 4, 1936, letter to Hale – which comes at the tail end of their discussion of "Burnt Norton" and *Agamemnon* – reveals that the nightingale is still very much in Eliot's mind, and still connected with the end of his "Sweeney" poem and Sophocles' "wood of the Furies."

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> I am the old house
> With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning,
> In which all past is present, all degradation
> Is unredeemable. As for what happens –
> Of the past you can only see what is past,
> Not what is always present. (234)

The play's goal is to teach him to live in this metaphorical house less agonizingly: the house of the individual person's consciousness, of the family and of the world, but also the house of Aeschylus in which this play takes place.

What allows healing change in both plays is the integration of the Furies into a community of memory. This is what Athena promises them by establishing their sanctuary below the Acropolis, and this is what Eliot's play implies and enacts for Harry. In *The Family Reunion*, the father and son are found to be more similar than dissimilar,[31] and the question of specific guilt is subsumed into a cyclical, unavoidable pattern, where (to use a phrase from "The Dry Salvages") the "fruit of action" – whether either Harry or his father killed their wives – matters less than the intent (*P* 198). Harry's discovery that his father had also wished to kill his pregnant mother doesn't remove his own guilt (for having, or not, pushed his wife to her death),[32] but, on the contrary, allows him to enter a community of guilt – what Eliot calls the "curse" in a nod to his Aeschylean precedent, but very much aligned, albeit in a heightened version, with Christian theology – which paradoxically frees him of his solitary, private burden. "Now I can live in public," he declares (276), and indeed he begins to show more empathy towards his mother Amy, apologizing, for example, for his bad manners (280, 286–87). At the same time, he more or less knows that his departure may kill her and, departing nonetheless, he fulfills his dead father's aborted wish. The reunion of the title is, on the one hand, an ironic jab at the failed reunion depicted in the play (two of the sons fail to come, the one who comes leaves, the mother dies) but, on the other, suggestive of the real reunion that has taken place on a different level. Harry is reunited with his ghostly father and ghostly/surrogate mother Agatha, and thus with the old drama and the old house of Aeschylus, rather than with the family that mostly fails to constitute itself in the present. Harry puts it in exactly these terms: Upon realizing that "Perhaps my life has only been a dream / Dreamt through me by the minds of others," he declares,

[31] *CPP* 262, 266; *pace* Smith, *Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice*, 143.
[32] Eliot leaves this intentionally opaque (*CPP* 235, 275); see also Browne, *Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays*, 107–08.

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focusing again on the moment of construction of the inherited legacy, "I feel happy for a moment, *as if* I had come home" (275, my emphasis). In contrast to Orestes, who thanks Athena for saving his more literal home and returning him to his homeland (*Eumenides*, lines 754–56), Harry relegates his material home to the care of his absent brother, and to its natural cycle of life: "Let the cricket chirp" (281).

At the turning point of the play Agatha and Harry develop the rose-garden imagery from "Burnt Norton." Recalling the "tiny voices" also audible in the earlier poem, they enter into a trance, in which they explore different directions of movement that echo the Heraclitean ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὡυτή: "Over and under / Echo and noise of feet," "In and out, in an endless drift," "Up and down through the stone passages," "Up and down. Until the chain breaks," "To and fro. / Until the chain breaks" (276, 277). The chain momentarily breaks when the patterned actions are seen not as imposed but as imaginatively entered – just as Eliot has used his own house poem "Burnt Norton" to reimagine Orestes' process of purgation:

> I was not there, you were not there, only our phantasms
> And what did not happen is as true as what did happen,
> O my dear, and you walked through the little door
> And I ran to meet you in the rose-garden. (277)

The story Agatha tells of an action she chose not to take in the past creates a communal space – explicitly marked as constructed or "poetic" through the rose-garden imagery itself and through the connection to "Burnt Norton" – that both she and Harry, who was not yet born at the time, can *now* enter and freely move in. Without denying that "everything is irrevocable" – that is, that the past cannot be undone (an undoing attempted by Aeschylus's Apollo, who declares Orestes "clean," or by Eliot's Amy, who insists that time has not passed) – Agatha holds out the possibility of redemption, just as earlier she had translated Harry's insistence on the "unredeemable" into the "irremediable" (228). The future she envisions retains, indeed inhabits the memory or "burden" of the past, the "consciousness of your unhappy family," but treats it as a kindly (hence, *Eumenides*) rather than as a hostile force (276, 275). This is a lesson for Eliot the dramatist as well, whose play does not "behave only / As if nothing had happened in the last eight [or two thousand] years," as Amy instructs her guests to do and as faithful (however construed) stagings of Aeschylus à la MacNeice might imply (230). Still living in the house of the past (unlike, too, the "superficial" O'Neill), he instead uses what happened to construct a potentially different future, a properly "tragic" might-have-been.

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The resolution of Eliot's play is more equivocal than Aeschylus's because both divine presence and deed/crime are attenuated, while the established system of justice is mostly an internal one and thus remains opaque. Harry leaves having secured some peace, but he knows neither where he is going nor why he is compelled to go. In Aeschylus, the Furies are persuaded by Athena to abandon their vengeful and bloody ways, so the shift is presented as an external change in world order. In Eliot, the process is fully internalized, even as the Eumenides are presented as an externalization of Harry's conscience, an objective correlative of guilt. What changes at the end of the play is his own perspective towards them; he feels "happiness" in acquiring "a different vision" (275). Though the suggestively named Agatha (i.e., 'good') momentarily steps into their place – in the most minimal evocation of the Aeschylean conversion of Furies to "Kindly Ones" – the figures in the embrasure remain the same, and it is Harry who proclaims that "now I know / that my business is not to run away, but to pursue" them (280). This concurrent objectification and psychologization of the Eumenides – their use as a kind of Poundian "image," both darting inwards and translated outwards – may be at the heart of the play's "failure of adjustment between the ancient and modern situation." For Harry's different vision is facilitated by Agatha but remains his own, and the play, invested in maintaining opacity (also so as not to appear fully religiously prescriptive), offers no real way for anyone else to participate in it.

But it's not for lack of trying. Eliot later spoke of having made "some progress in dispensing with the chorus" altogether here, and indeed he does away with the spectacular transformation of the Furies (*CP* 7, 599). Yet the play does have three chorus groups, suggesting Eliot's abiding investment in the poetic, ethical, and community-building function of the chorus, as well as his commitment to making the ancient–modern "adjustment." Aeschylus's play itself has multiple choruses: the Furies, who are then transformed; the chorus of Athenian women, who appear at Athena's instigation and who name the Furies as *semnai theai*, "Awesome Goddesses" (line 1041), sealing their transformation and uniting with them in a triumphant procession; and, we might add, a chorus that is not one in the assembled Athenian men of the jury, who do not speak but who join the procession at the end. Eliot's choruses map onto those of Aeschylus, though they scramble their characteristics; each, moreover, speaks to a different interpretation of the Greek chorus more broadly. At the same time, each chorus is aimed at, or supposed to represent, the section of the audience that responds to each of the play's "levels of significance," per Eliot's theory of the theater:

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the "simplest," the "more thoughtful," the "more literary," and the "more musically sensitive" (*CP* 4, 691).

Eliot's first chorus, the Aeschylean Eumenides, stay outside the house and are revealed when "the curtains part" to be "in the window embrasure" (253). Their appearance is always mediated/controlled by the pulling open of curtains – a mark of course of modern not ancient theatrical convention – which allows Eliot to tangibly question both the distinction between inside and outside and the "reality" of each of the presented worlds: Which one is the play? The Eumenides (whose name doesn't change in the stage directions and who are never named in the dialogue itself) are seen by the play's preferred "enlightened" or "literary" characters (Harry, Agatha, and Mary) but also, quite matter-of-factly ("them ghosts"; 289), by Harry's chauffeur Downing, who clearly doesn't belong to their upper-class, formally educated world – again we may view this as Eliot's attempt to expand the reach of his "message."[33] These Eumenides are not only static, but also silent, an emblem of the remnants of the play's ancient life and ancient theology, only accessible through our (psychological) projections. This would hold true both for those who don't know Greek and, per Woolf's essay, for those who claim to do so. So, the "more literary" members of the audience may catch the allusion both to the *Libation Bearers* and to Eliot's own use of it in *Sweeney Agonistes* when Harry enters uttering Aeschylean lines: "Look there, look there: do you see them? / … / No, no, not there. Look there! / Can't you see them? *You* don't see them, but I see them" (232). But, Harry immediately adds that, though he had a presentiment of them, "This is the first time that I have seen them"; he thus marks both the renewal of the play – the redoing of its ritual – and the degree to which it is unknown (232). It is telling that Eliot later decided the Eumenides were unnecessary qua physical presences, erasing once and for all the ancient chorus.[34] Though all three of his later plays would use Greek plots and echoes, none even attempts to transplant so *visibly* a part of the ancient work.

The second chorus is self-consciously formed by Harry's uncles and aunts – "Assembled like amateur actors" – who "find themselves dressed for a different play, or having rehearsed the wrong parts," suggesting thus the apparent incompatibility between the ancient play and the modern one (231). They are the stereotypical "average citizens": willfully blind,

[33] *The Confidential Clerk*, for example, develops this motif, making the retired clerk Eggerson into the play's most spiritually aware yet modest character.

[34] *CP* 7, 600.

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risk-averse, not self-aware, occasionally cliché-spouting individuals, with some redeeming qualities, who are shown to acquire a modicum of insight over the course of the play.[35] By the beginning of the second part, for example, they acknowledge that "In an old house … more is heard than is spoken" and resign themselves more knowingly to their impotence ("There is nothing to do about anything") and to their daily pastimes (270–71). By the play's close, they seem to have become even more attuned to the growing crisis: They begin by starkly outlining their human limitations ("We do not like to look out of the same window, and see quite a different landscape"), and end by admitting that "We have lost our way in the dark," questioning "what are we, and what are we doing?" (290–91). Presumably this is the state that Eliot wishes to cultivate in his audience, shaking us out of our familiar crutches into spiritual questioning – turning us from plot-following "simplest" audience members to "thoughtful" ones. Immediately after the last joint choral song, each chorus member is given a solo line, as if to suggest the different (mostly mundane) paths down which such questioning might lead, their particular "adjust[ments] to the moment" (292). Eliot himself claimed to identify with one of the uncles, Charles,[36] who gets the last solo line. It's an admission of failure coupled with a hint of insight: "I fear that my mind is not what it was – or was it? – and yet I think that I might understand" (291). If the Eumenides, vocal as Furies in Aeschylus, are silent in Eliot, Aeschylus's mostly silent Athenian citizens, split in their assessment of the two rival claims, are here given voice. Neither the supernatural nor the divine can be represented on the London stage, only the fumbling human responses to them.

The third and final chorus materializes once the aunts and uncles have left the stage and is comprised of Agatha and Mary, the Athena and Elektra figures. They are educated, perceptive, and yet stifled women who assist in Harry's illumination: They "create the god," in Harrisonian terminology; are "only watchers and waiters" in Agatha's (246). This is the "ritualist" chorus, aimed at the "musical" part of the audience. They speak in shorter lines (two or three beats each), occasionally rhyme, develop a refrain, while literally having to "*walk slowly in single file round and round the table, clockwise*" and to blow out candles "*at each revolution*" (292, italics in original). Surprisingly, given their placement at the play's end and thus their alignment with Aeschylus's chorus of Athenian maidens, they sound most

[35] *Pace* Gardner, *The Art of T. S. Eliot*, 141. Hiscock, "Reception Theory," 328–29, compellingly claims that this chorus combines all of the Oresteian choruses.
[36] Browne, *Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays*, 106.

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like the Aeschylean Furies. They talk about the development and inevitability of the "curse," placing "its operation" "in the night time / And in the nether world / Where the meshes we have woven / Bind us to each other," and egging each other on to "Follow follow" (repeated four times). But in re-doing the past, they also undo it and pre-do the future: "So the knot be unknotted / … / And the curse be ended,"[37] a goal towards which their present actions – "This way the pilgrimage / Of expiation / Round and round the circle" – are aimed (293). This chorus, then, is the one that embodies both forces: the cursing, binding of the Furies, and the expiation of the Eumenides. The play's last line, uttered by Agatha – "May they rest in peace" – is the only explicit and serious indication[38] of the divine power that, in Eliot's mind, has replaced Aeschylus's gods, just as Agatha herself had "*step[ped] into the place which the* EUMENIDES *had occupied*" in the conclusion of her trance scene with Harry (293, 278). *The Family Reunion* becomes the "path that [Aeschylus] did not take" that echoes "thus" in our mind.

From the Reunion *Back to the* Quartets

The Family Reunion, like Pound's *Elektra*, is torn between its two constituents – Greek and English, ancient structure and contemporary relevance, paganism and Christianity – and thus also struggles to balance its choral/communal and individual voices, to present clearly (though not necessarily overtly) the common *logos* that underwrites them. To end the cycle of violence it depicts, the *Oresteia* proposes adjudication: an overarching system that determines how you decide between apparently competing systems/ideas of right and uses arbitration to avoid arbitrariness. *The Eumenides* is ultimately more concerned with establishing a human system of justice that would complement the divine one than with the individual case of Orestes, and positions humans as being potentially able to mediate between two contrasting forms of divine justice (represented by the Furies and by Apollo), a degree of human agency that Eliot could not have admitted in his play; hence its open and somewhat unsatisfactory ending.

The different choral "voices" of *The Family Reunion* may be seen already in the multiple poetic registers of "Burnt Norton"; they are amplified in

[37] Agatha has spoken similar lines twice already, once to close out part I ("till the knot is unknotted," 257) and a second time at the end of her reverie with Harry: "The knot shall be unknotted" (279). Note the subjunctive formulation in the final restatement; Agatha herself has learned that the future must remain to some extent uncertain.

[38] As opposed to the fanciful, and rejected, idea of Harry becoming a missionary (286–87).

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the remaining three quartets since in "Burnt Norton" it is Harry's solitary philosophical and tortured voice that predominates. The intoning formal lyrics in the quartets' fourth parts, for example, could function as Christianized versions of the *Reunion*'s ritualist chorus; the chatty prosiness or even "bad" poetry often seen in the second parts echoes the aunts and uncles chorus more mundanely groping their way, sometimes reversing course ("That was a way of putting it" [*P* 187]); the moments of silent conversion – recalling the (non-)movement of "still" in "Burnt Norton" – are presaged by Eliot's treatment of the Eumenides. Even as they depend on some of the tools Eliot developed in the play (most centrally, that silent and invisible transformation of the Eumenides), the post-*Family Reunion* quartets can be seen as an attempt to tackle more conclusively the questions that Aeschylus poses – the enchaining curse or the cycle of sin/crime, the possibility of conversion or of reconciliation between earthly and divine, the link between individual suffering and the community – but by not relying on the tragedian's own solution.

Despite its perceived weaknesses, *The Family Reunion* leads quite seamlessly into "East Coker," the quartet most concerned with the different uses of the past. The poem is devoted to the thinking of circularity that *The Family Reunion* introduces without fully resolving. Near the play's conclusion Harry says, "This is like an end," to which Agatha adds, "And a beginning" (275). "East Coker" famously begins, "In my beginning is my end," and ends, "In my end is my beginning" (*P* 185, 192). In its course Eliot moves from the single, negatively shaded reference to life in "Burnt Norton" ("but that which is only living / Can only die"; 183) to the acceptance of a biblically tinged life cycle in part I ("Houses live and die: there is a time for building / And a time for living and for generation"; 185), and finally to the more Aeschylean-by-way-of-*Family Reunion* dialectic in part V:

> Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
> The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
> Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
> Isolated, with no before and after,
> But a lifetime burning in every moment
> And not the lifetime of one man only
> But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. (191)

That the stones cannot be deciphered does not make them any less part of the family "curse," and yet, as with the end of *The Family Reunion* or with the Heraclitus fragments, it is important for Eliot to maintain some opacity as a positive value. "East Coker" has already warned us not to impose "knowledge" or experience previously acquired onto the present

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and future, since "The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies" (187). Its second section explores the dangers of relying too much on the past, whether that's construed as outdated symbolist poetics ("A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion"); as the legacy of "quiet-voiced elders, / Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit"; or the overconfidence of "old men" which is the product not of "wisdom" but of "folly" (187, 188). Such reliance would blind us to the present, to the fact that "the pattern is new in every moment" (187). "East Coker" v is now also telling us – à la Woolf – not to think that we know *the past* just because we have studied it: It too can remain a mystery and so, because not yet understood, form a kind of future, exactly as Eliot had attempted to construct it in *The Family Reunion*.

Eliot's verse pattern continues to be performative, or dramatic,[39] throughout the *Quartets*: a way not just to involve the reader in the production of meaning, but to use poetic means to enact or embody what the poem is speaking of. The lines cited above rhyme *abc-ac**d**b*, even as the discursive tone obscures it. The disruptive *d* rhyme "only" – another favorite word of the *Quartets* – does what it says: The individual life or moment occurs within the pattern but also has its own contours, its own movement. (That the passage is developing the opposite/complementary perspective highlights this point.) In the present moment there may always be a surprise or small difference that could turn out to be meaningful or cause a slight shift in the pattern; hence the poem's emphasis at the end on "beginning" rather than ending, on beginning (again) having accepted the end. It is this understanding of "life" that is carried on in the following quartets, with their ever widening frame of vision,[40] and it is in this sense that Eliot can speak of the "life of *significant* soil" at the end of "Dry Salvages" v (200, my emphasis).

"The Dry Salvages" as a whole thematizes the production of significance, on both a moral/ethical level and a linguistic one. One of its polysemous kernels is the word *end* itself, as developed in the poem's version of a Provençal lyric: the six six-line stanzas, unrhymed internally but rhyming across, that make up the beginning of part II.[41] Detailing the difficult life of fishermen along the Massachusetts coast already evoked in the poem's

[39] See Abbott, "Eliot's Ghostly Footfalls," 384.

[40] Gardner, *Art of T. S. Eliot*, 58–60. Eliot tells Hale that "East Coker" is a "hopeful" poem "for the individual spirit if not for society" (April 12, 1940), while, as mentioned above, he embarked on "The Dry Salvages" in a fully communal spirit.

[41] This form has been called a sestina, but it is a separate Provençal form (*coblas unisonans*), of which the sestina, Arnaut Daniel's late invention, is an elaboration.

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first section, this lyric exploits its intricate structure to let the "bell" clang differently, and better "measur[e] time not our time" (194). Its first and fourth stanzas wonder whether "there is an end" to the fishermen's daily toil among the "drifting wreckage" and the "ocean … littered with wastage," while the second and third claim that not only is there no end, but "There is the final addition, the failing / Pride or resentment at failing powers," the further disgrace of aging (195). Accordingly, though in a single stanza there seems to be substantial sonic variation (no rhyme), the movement across stanzas, through time as it were, produces an inescapable pattern: the pattern of specific (word) ending despite slight differences or addition in (word) beginning. Whether "motionless" (stanza 1) or "emotionless" (stanza 2), "less" is guaranteed; that the rhymes are usually polysyllabic only reinforces the definitiveness of the ending. But the lyric ends in a conversion akin to that of Harry vis-à-vis the Eumenides. Conceding that "there is no end of it," the fifth stanza implores us to think of the fishermen otherwise: "as forever bailing, / Setting and hauling" and "Not as making a trip that will be unpayable / For a haul that will not bear examination" (195). The focus is on the process, here communal rather than individual, not the result. In the sixth and final stanza, all of the first stanza's rhyme words reappear to mark the closing of the poem in a kind of envoi, but with two key differences: "unprayable" softens into "hardly, barely prayable," and "annunciation" inaudibly turns into "Annunciation." The recursive pattern is still present, the chain unbroken, the toil not overcome or forgotten – much as the Eumenides in Eliot's play remain what they always were – yet a little bit of breathing room has been found within it: the prayer that the temporal end (qua conclusion) might almost silently announce a more significant end (qua purpose or goal). It is in this way that our "temporal reversion nourish[es] / … / The life of significant soil" at poem's end. Returning *to* time from the momentary sensation of the timeless, or returning *in* time to the soil whence we came, can be more than a necessary cycle of houses born and dying. The individual or communal life can signify into the future – "fructify in the lives of others" (198) – if one is attuned to its often silent tolling.

"Little Gidding" partly devotes itself to unraveling that process of signification – "the communication / Of the dead" – from the recipient's end, and it does so dramatically, or at least dialogically (202). The second section in part II depicts exactly such a dramatic conversation, using a famously complex arrangement of personae and a very self-conscious formal pattern. Building on his use of feminine rhymes for the Provençal canzon of "Dry Salvages" II, here Eliot writes in a modified

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terza rima – of course the perfect formal structure for Eliot's insistence on thinking enchainment and circularity together with slight difference/movement forward. Each tercet literally sets the pattern, but leaves an opening for something different, for a new pattern to be formed. Eliot thus formally gestures towards the relationship between past, present, and future that the *Quartets* have been building towards, both on the small scale of the tercet and on the larger scale of intertextual borrowings (Dante, Yeats, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Shakespeare, and others). But what "rhymes" has been converted. Other than in the first few tercets that help attune us to the pattern, it is not sound that recurs and alternates but stress placement: masculine and feminine word endings. That is, as in the borrowing of Dante's description of and address to his own old teacher Brunetto Latini and its re-direction towards the "Little Gidding" speaker's own "compound ghost," structurally too Dante himself is silent, dead, "unidentifiable," much like the Eumenides in *The Family Reunion* – but the space for that silence, for Dante's felt absence, is made possible by Eliot's speech.

What the dialogue with Dante exemplifies is what section III spells out. For after all the dead tell us nothing – "We cannot restore old policies / Or follow an antique drum" – but what they allow, in commanding our attention, is a common grounding and groping (206). And it is on this note that the *Quartets* conclude, finally "translating" Heraclitus into the New Testament through the evocation of Pentecost. "Pentecostal fire" opens section I (201), is developed narratively in the second part of section II ("the dark dove with the flickering tongue," 203), and is brought to a climax in section IV. The Pentecostal descent of the Holy Spirit represents of course the quintessential moment of translatability, a recuperation of the Tower of Babel into a celebration of the union of tongues. The emphasis in the New Testamental account is not so much on the Apostles' impressive new ability to speak in other languages, but on the fact that "devout men, out of every nation under heaven" *hear* them otherwise than they did before: "hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God" (Acts 2:5, 2:11). The scene's conclusion echoes the Heraclitean common *logos*: "And all that believed were together, and had all things in common [*koina*]" (Acts 2:44). *Koinos*, the same Greek word, is now heard differently.[42] Just like Aeschylus's in *The Family Reunion*, Heraclitus's Greek is silently converted in the space of Eliot's *Quartets*; the Word transcends language(s) indeed.

[42] The word appears in the variant form of *xynos* in the Heraclitean phrase.

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"Fire and Fire": Herakles in "Little Gidding" IV and *The Cocktail Party*

What the Tongues Declare

The move to the *Eumenides* made sense for Eliot's artistic and intellectual development, as that to the *Elektra* would for Pound. Both poets' subsequent shift to Herakles is stranger, since this hero is almost completely absent from Pound's mythical imaginary[43] and only incidentally present in Eliot's.[44] But Herakles becomes central to Eliot's work in the 1940s, providing the organizing, transformative image for "Little Gidding," and the model for the transformative character in *The Cocktail Party*, a play based on Euripides' *Alcestis*. Herakles was an "ambivalent hero" in Greco-Roman antiquity: "at one extreme he can be regarded as the greatest of men, a model to be emulated; at the other extreme he can be seen as an overreacher, the very exemplar of human hubris."[45] We see the former view, for example, in Euripides' *Herakles Mainomenos,* where there is reference to his civilizing mission, and in Seneca's (?) *Hercules Oetaeus*,[46] as well as in Stoic writings, where Hercules is a "model of virtue."[47] We may see the latter in Sophocles' *Trachiniai*; it is definitely present in Seneca's *Hercules Furens*. The primary distinction between the Greek tragedians and Seneca, though, lies in the presentation of Herakles' deification: Seneca consistently portrays him as a semi-divine hero (with some reservation as to the positive value of this), whereas even the more sympathetic Euripides avoids "any emphasis on the divine destiny of Hercules."[48] Certainly the Herakles of "Little Gidding" is Seneca's,[49] but Eliot's later, less heroic, use of the character in his adaptation of *Alcestis* may owe less to Euripides and more to H.D.

[43] Other than some throwaway references and the use of a Stesichorus fragment about Herakles in Canto 23, on which see Liebregts, "Pound and Stesichorus in *Canto 23*."
[44] See Niesen de Abruña, "Lengthened Shadow of a Myth," esp. 67–68.
[45] Fitch, ed., *Seneca's Hercules Furens*, 20, discussed 15–20.
[46] Current scholarship leans against attributing the authorship of *Hercules Oetaeus* to Seneca even though it is included as his tenth play in both extant manuscript traditions (and thus translated in the Elizabethan *Tenne Tragedies*). However, as recently as 2017, Konstan suggests that "the question remains open" and himself believes it may have been an unfinished draft by Seneca (*Hercules on Oeta*, 107). Eliot refers to it as a play by Seneca (*CP* 4, 687). Should he have researched the question, perhaps during his time at Harvard, he may have found a 1905 essay by Walter Summers in the *Classical Review*, which sums up the authorship issues that had been raised about *HO* since the 1860s and attempts to painstakingly sort out which elements in it are Senecan.
[47] Konstan, trans., *Hercules Mad*, 54, and discussed 54–56.
[48] Fitch, ed., *Seneca's Hercules Furens*, 23.
[49] *Pace* Brooker, *Eliot's Dialogic Imagination*, 179.

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Seneca's drama, we recall, is for Eliot a drama of the "word." His shift from the Orestean to the Heraklean myth in the *Quartets*, and from a somewhat close to a more distant approach to Greek drama, is mediated through that pure "word" of Seneca that "haunt[s] us more than we should expect," and that in 1927 was preferred to the messier "real thing" of Sophocles (*CP* 3, 201, 197). Already since the 1920s, Eliot's approach to Greek drama had been filtered through Seneca.[50] Pound, for example, recognized the verse structure of *Sweeney Agonistes* as Senecan,[51] while even the choice to present the Eumenides as ghosts in *The Family Reunion* may have been indebted to the Roman dramatist. One of Seneca's haunting phrases echoes throughout Eliot's poetic, dramatic, and critical work, providing him with the frequently used astronomical imagery of solar fire and ice. The line appears, with some variation, in both of Seneca's *Hercules* plays, and Eliot often recalls it in its translation/reuse by George Chapman in his early seventeenth-century play *Bussy d'Ambois*: "flie where men feele / The burning axeltree; and those that suffer / Beneath the chariot of the snowy Beare" (Act v, scene iv, lines 104–06).[52] The imagery is evoked and the line is cited several times in *Poems* (1920); via Kyd's Hieronimo in *The Waste Land*;[53] in "Ash-Wednesday," "Marina," even in the cat poems; and Eliot explicitly remarks upon its "personal saturation value" for him in "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" (*CP* 4, 687).[54] It is through this imagery that, in the closing moments of the *Quartets*, Eliot leaves Aeschylus, Agamemnon, and Orestes behind – together with "Little Gidding"'s other "broken king," Charles I – in favor of a different myth that more fully redeems their story, not on the human level of the *polis*[55] (as *The Eumenides* does) but on the spiritual one (*P* 201).

It is this Senecan language that is used to describe Harry's future trials in *The Family Reunion* ("Moving alone through flames of ice," e.g.); it re-emerges first in "East Coker" iv ("If to be warmed, then I must freeze / And quake in frigid purgatorial fires") and then in "Little Gidding" i ("When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire, / The brief sun flames the ice") before it reaches its culmination in "Little Gidding" iv (*CPP* 274; *P* 190, 201). There Hercules' "intolerable shirt of flame / Which

[50] Staley, "T. S. Eliot's Seneca," *passim*.
[51] Ibid., 351n11, quoting Kenner.
[52] *Hercules Furens* 1139–40 and *Hercules Oetaeus* 1286–89. Chapman's "axeltree" is from *HO* 1281.
[53] Wilson, "Introduction," xxv, notes the "obvious affinities" between Seneca's Hercules as Kyd's Hieronimo.
[54] For more references and resonances, see *P* 490–92.
[55] On Pound and Eliot's differing conceptions of the *polis*, see Rabaté, *Language, Sexuality, and Ideology*, 215–16.

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human power cannot remove" is evoked, and made to coincide with the poem's separately developed Pentecostal imagery. Eliot relies on *Hercules Oetaeus* rather than *Furens*. The story in *HO* (as in the *Trachiniai*) is that of yet another spousal murder: It is his wife Deianira that has given Hercules the "shirt of flame." But in this case Deianira herself has been tricked; she believes that the poisoned shirt will turn Hercules' attentions away from his new lover and back towards her. That is, Klytemnestra's guilt by deceit is replaced with Deianira's guilt by accident – same fruit of action, different intent. This is brought to the fore in Seneca's version of the tragedy.[56]

In *HO* both Hercules and Deianira are spiritually transformed. In the beginning of the play, Hercules lists his toils and complains to Jove that he has not yet been given his place in the stars ("But to me, Father, / heaven's still denied"; lines 7–8),[57] while Deianira vows to kill him because of his infidelity. Yet she inexplicably snaps out of it: "What's this? My mind draws back and lays aside its threats, / my wrath's retreated" (lines 307–08). Though she goads herself on, she does in the end decide that the solution to her problem is "not spears, armor, or the threat of fire," but love (line 479). "Love will be the final toil of Hercules," she cryptically declares, before praying to the unnamed Eros to "Loose love on him" so that he may "learn to love his wife" (lines 474, 554, 557). Ironically, her love, in the form of the poisoned robe, kindles an internal "sluggish heat" that "burns up [his] marrow," which leads Hercules to seek an external pyre to extinguish it and himself (lines 1223, 1220). The play ends with a suggestion of the Trinity that cannot have escaped Eliot. As Hercules' mother laments his death, holding on to his ashes, the hero's reassuring voice echoes from the heavens; his very presence there confirms that he is god's son, something that at the moment of his fiery death (and unlike in the play's beginning) he had stopped demanding proof of.[58] As Konstan notes, here "there is none of the doubt about divine benevolence or concern for humanity that marked the finale of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*," since the play "ends in the triumph of a great spirit amidst the universal admiration of lesser beings who nevertheless participate in some measure in the transcendent glory of the hero."[59] Eliot signals this transformation of "love"

[56] It is Seneca and not Sophocles who elaborates on Hercules' inability to remove the tunic – "as he tried to pull / it off, pulled off his limbs despite himself" since "the cloak's / part of his brutish body, garment mixed with skin" (lines 829–31; trans. Konstan) – a fact on which Eliot's lyric's moral force depends. The question of intent is also taken up; see lines 885–88.

[57] Konstan's translation here and below. This line of thinking recalls Becket's fourth temptation (self-martyrdom) in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

[58] Lines 1500–04.

[59] *Hercules Oetaeus*, 110.

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through the word's repetition in "Little Gidding" IV: "Who then devised the torment? Love. / Love is the unfamiliar Name / Behind the hands that wove" (*P* 207). In a literal sense it is Deianira's love for Hercules that wove this shirt, but by the second line it is transformed into a love "unfamiliar" to Seneca (and indeed, Deianira hasn't actually named Eros in her prayer) just as the pagan myth is into a Christian pattern.[60]

Eliot struggled over the composition of "Little Gidding" IV.[61] He had what became its first stanza from the start, but in the first draft it was the conclusion of a three-stanza poem. Kept unaltered in the final version, it becomes not an end but a beginning. Its imagery clearly fits with the rest of the quartet, also recalling "East Coker" and *The Family Reunion*. It is also perfectly aurally constructed.

> The **d**ove **de**scending breaks the air
> With flame of incan**de**scent terror
> Of which the tongues **de**clare
> The one **di**scharge from sin and error.
> The only hope, or else **de**spair
> Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –
> To be re**dee**med from fire by fire. (*P* 207; my notation)

The dove's *d* physically breaks the air when we pronounce it in almost every line; by the time we get to "redeemed," it is finally part of a long, stressed, and internally rhymed syllable, as if it has come into its own. The distribution of masculine rhymes (*a*) and feminine ones (*b*) echoes that of the earlier modified *terza rima* section (fittingly since it is *its* "dark dove with the flickering tongue" that's being transformed here), while the final couplet's *c* rhyme, neither fully monosyllabic nor disyllabic, reconciles them. Moreover, all three rhyme sounds in this stanza are remarkably close, with the first syllable of the disyllabic *b* rhyme rhyming with the *a* rhyme. Through their shared *r*, the *b* and *c* rhymes themselves are additionally slant rhymes with each other and with the *a* rhyme. The consistency of sound mirrors the definitiveness of meaning – "*the* dove," "*the one* discharge," "*the only* hope," "*the* choice" – and thus the apparent certainty of redemption, while also performing the transformation of one thing into its "opposite" ("terror" dispels "error," "declaring" dispels "despairing") just as the whole stanza reframes

[60] Of course, as Asmis et al. point out, "Christian thought owes [Stoicism] a large debt" ("Seneca and His World," xv), which meant that Senecan tragedies could lend themselves to Christian readings more easily. Eliot's "unfamiliar" may also be alluding to the end of *Inferno* 26, and Ulysses' sighting of the – to him – unfamiliar mountain and strange/new land ("nova terra"; line 137) of purgatory.

[61] See Gardner, *Composition*, 212–18. See also Abbott, "Eliot's Ghostly Footfalls," 382–83.

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the German bomber of part II as the Holy Spirit. It prepares us, too, for the couplet in which – as in the Provençal lyric of "The Dry Salvages" – we are supposed to detect difference despite the identity of sound, even as we are also asked to align the Greek "pyre" with the Germanic "fire."

But the poem's second and now last stanza pulls back from this certainty. The Holy Ghost's "d(e)" mark appears only in the first line, its stress lost already, before it gives way to what "devised" it, just as *De*ianira's love gives way to the "unfamiliar" one. In speaking of that origin, the poem itself becomes less "devised":

> Who then **de**vised the torment? Love.
> Love is the unfamiliar Name
> Behind the hands that wove
> The intolerable shirt of flame
> Which human power cannot remove.
> We only live, only suspire
> Consumed by either fire or fire. (*P* 207; my notation)

The stanza's first two lines begin with metrical inversions, while "intolerable" makes the scansion of the fourth line tricky. Eliot maintains the earlier *ababacc* rhyme scheme, but now the rhymes are completely distinct; in fact, the *a* rhyme is mostly a visual one. The remaining vowel+*r* sounds in the middle of the lines are here tied wholly to the human, while the *l* and *v* of "love" become prominent (echoing, too, the previous section's "behovely" refrain) though not as pervasive as the *r* sounds were in the first stanza. "Love," a sentence unto itself and the start of another, is emphasized qua force, but its grammatical positioning allows Eliot to defer and deflect a capitalization that would be specifically meaningful ("Love" vs. "love," mirroring "Annunciation" vs. "annunciation" in "Dry Salvages" II). While "only" in the first stanza outlined a clear choice, here it is repeated, apparently tautologically, and yet is ambiguous in meaning. Is the implication that we live solely by virtue of being consumed, that that consumption is the one thing that drives our living? Or do we "only," that is, merely, live when we are consumed, as opposed to something other/better than, or additional to living?[62] Is "suspire" a clarification of what "live" consists in (and thus a reduction of life to breath) or a metaphorical intensification (our very breath depends on this consumption)? Each reading produces a very different interpretation of the whole stanza. Finally, despite the surface

[62] The first interpretation is more intuitive, but think about "Burnt Norton" V, "but that which is *only living* / Can *only die*" (183; my italics) or "The Dry Salvages" II, "not the experience of *one life only* / But of many generations" (196; my italics).

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similarity between the two stanzas' couplets, "consumed" holds little of the promise of "redeemed." The last line of the first stanza, moreover, presents a clear process with its two prepositions, while that of the second is again more ambiguous: Is "consumed by" a rough synonym for "obsessed with" (and one can be in this sense consumed by either the fire of lust or the fire of God) and so used in an active sense? Or is it passive? Is there still a "choice"? Hercules' willed act of self-immolation doesn't seem to be available in the second stanza, even as his "shirt of flame" takes center stage.[63] Similarly, the transfiguration of the fighter plane into the Holy Ghost, a human-made destructive force into a divine creative one, also disappears here, or is further converted into a now *internal* force – for we recall that Hercules' shirt causes his insides to burn – that cannot be quieted.

Despite its apparent certainty about "love," then, the second stanza is calculated to take back the certainty of the first, to burn down its rhetorical and auditory fire. Just as it declares "love," the poem begins to really "speak in *to*ngues" (*to*rment, in*to*lerable), and, as with those gathering around the Apostles in Acts 2, what we hear depends on where we come from. This stanza admits more gradations of meaning than the first and more uncertainty about our fate, further diminishing our agency. It's as if the poem is itself converted – just as Hercules and Deianira are in Seneca's play – from knowledge into humility: from a pattern in which humans can play a part (similar to that envisioned by Aeschylus in his *Eumenides*) or at least choose the right fire for the right reasons to one in which they cannot and do not, and in which besides the burning (and all it entails: "*the* hands," "*the* shirt") there is no other certainty, in which "love" (and its rhyme, "dove") remains unfamiliar to those who "live" even as it underwrites or comprises the common *logos*. The Latinate "suspire" definitely places "us" and our breathing below (*sub+spirare*) something and returns us synecdochically but not aurally to the "dove descending." It replaces the Greek "pyre" (which has been stripped of its "power") in the couplet just as Seneca's Christian premonitions replace Eliot's constructed Greek poetics. A similar buildup and perhaps less calculated deconstruction of the Heraklean image will take place in Pound's *Women of Trachis*.

"The play is going on now": Analyzing Herakles with H.D.

The reasons for which Senecan tragedy is appealing to Eliot – the allusive quality and feel of "belatedness," the overwhelming sense of crisis,

[63] For a different reading of the three fires here, see Bradbury, "*Four Quartets*," 265–69.

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the "stifling, claustrophobic atmosphere" of individuals struggling with and against their passions, and on a technical level, the demotion of the chorus – also suggest its limitations: "we miss the sense of community," Emily Wilson writes.[64] Having more successfully reconciled the ancient and modern element through the *Quartets*' latent development of Senecan imagery, and having established and justified a poetics of hearing the same differently, Eliot returns to Greek, freed of any compulsion to explicitly evoke it, and better able to take the opposite path from Eugene O'Neill, with not even a single external sign to declare his prototype. That is, both *The Family Reunion* (due to its "failure") and the *Quartets* (due to their "success") allow Eliot to move towards a different way of accessing Greek drama and its promise of community-building: not "Greek with tears," but Greek with "no chorus and no ghosts" (*CP* 7, 601), with no explicit ritual or stylization, and no Aeschylus.

The ending of "Little Gidding" – the last major poem Eliot would publish – thus catalyzes the next stage in his career. His final three plays, all re-enacting barely recognizable Greek plots, feature mostly non-exceptional characters in upper-crust but low-stakes, apparently comedic British settings, avoid all explicit mention of religion or attempt at conversion – for that would be presumptuous – but toll the annunciatory bell no less. Just as "annunciation" may become "Annunciation" (or not) and "love" "Love," a cocktail party may become the site of communion. So Eliot commits to an almost unabating naturalism in both plot and poetic style: He speaks of having followed his "ascetic rule" so well that "with such success … it is perhaps an open question whether there is any poetry in the play at all" (*CP* 7, 601). He not only changes his mind about the relative importance of explicitly marked ritual space and of theatrical realism in his art, but also about Euripides, to whom he now twice turns: His *Alcestis* provides a source for *The Cocktail Party*, and his *Ion* a model for *The Confidential Clerk*.

A few years after the play's enthusiastic reception in both England and New York, Eliot mock-complained that the indebtedness of his *Cocktail Party* to the *Alcestis* had not been noticed:

> I was still inclined to go to a Greek dramatist for my theme, but I was determined to do so merely as a point of departure, and to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself. In this at least I have been successful; for no one of my acquaintance (and no dramatic critics) recognized the source of my story in the *Alcestis* of

[64] "Introduction," xxii, xx, xxi.

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> Euripides. In fact, I have had to go into detailed explanation to convince them – I mean, of course, those who were familiar with the plot of that play – of the genuineness of the inspiration. (*CP* 7, 601)

Since then, the parallels between *Alcestis* and *The Cocktail Party* have been amply discussed,[65] and I agree with Heilman's conclusion that the play "seizes upon thematic material latent in *Alcestis* and dramatically explores it further, reinterprets it, and enlarges it."[66] Though in some respects this is similar to H.D.'s treatment of the *Ion* and Pound's of the *Trachiniai*, the main distinction between their approaches is that Eliot's play is not meant to exist symbiotically or in dialogue with the Greek play, but rather to supersede it. Hence Eliot's pleasure at evading detection, with regards to both the source of *The Cocktail Party* and his transposition of Agamemnon's dying scene discussed in Chapter 2, despite the "genuineness of the inspiration" and the truly many thematic and structural parallels. Eliot's Herakles, the ingeniously named psychiatrist Harcourt-Reilly, proclaims near the end of the play that "Only by acceptance / Of the past will you *alter* its meaning" (*CPP* 385, my emphasis). Having finally accepted Euripides' potential relevance for the kind of twentieth-century audience that he now wants to reach, Eliot too alters the meaning of Greek tragedy. Rather than leave us in the uncomfortable space chosen by Euripides as the conclusion for his play – Alcestis restored from death but mute, giving us no real sense of whether this is indeed a happy ending – Eliot has his Herakles teach the restored couple how to better interact with each other, and shows us a more congenial relationship between them at the end of his play.[67] Unlike in *The Family Reunion*, where, unable to use Aeschylus's solution, Eliot left the play more open, here he closes it up. Even though *The Cocktail Party*, unlike Eliot's last two plays, maintains a martyr figure in Celia (essentially by doubling Alcestis into two female characters),[68] whose path is supposed to be unknown and unfathomable even to Harcourt-Reilly, she too is given a parodic, self-referential end. Eliot thus institutes a black-and-white opposition: The "saint's" path cannot but appear absurd to "most of us" who are not on it, even as it may catalyze change within the community.

[65] Heilman, "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," 105–16 (cf. Reckford, "Heracles and Mr. Eliot," 2–3), Jansen, "Heracles and Friendship." The most incisive account of the relationship between Eliot and Euripides remains that of Arrowsmith, "Transfiguration in Eliot and Euripides," and "English Verse Drama (II)."

[66] "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," 106.

[67] Ibid., 108.

[68] Ibid., 110, for the unfolding of this double analogy. Severin, "Cutting Philomela's Tongue," provides an important critique of Eliot's diminution of Alcestis's powers but misses some of the play's subtleties.

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But, if the *Quartets* had suggested that art should be "still moving," these late plays – despite keeping to the letter of the lesson learned in the *Quartets* – more tightly knot what, for example, Euripides only superficially resolves through a *deus ex machina*, and while they aim to allow for significant richness and variation in ordinary life, they fail to evoke it as Eliot humbly renounces the breadth of his own poetic talent.[69]

Eliot's turn to *Alcestis* specifically may well have been motivated by a restored interest in Herakles as a figure, or by the fact that, as Heilman puts it, it is a play "virtually made for Christian readaptation."[70] Indeed, Eliot had told Emily Hale in April 1945 that though his most recent work was "hopeful," he had not yet "written any poem around the theme of the Resurrection," which is precisely the plot that *Alcestis* provides: Alcestis offers to die for her husband and does, but is then restored to life by Herakles.[71] Eliot may have known the prose translation of *Alcestis* by Richard Aldington, published in 1930;[72] he certainly mentioned admiringly in 1939 the Fitzgerald/Fitts translation that had been published by Faber (*L-TSE* 6, 162n1). It perhaps gave him the initial impetus for a post-*Family Reunion* play then,[73] which he abandoned because of the war only to recall it after the revival of the *Reunion* in 1946. But what seems to me must have at least partially prompted his (re)turn to *Alcestis* in the late 1940s, and in this particular configuration, was H.D. Taking her cue from Freud's own theories of psychic development for which Greek tragedy acted as a model or shorthand, H.D. imagines the *Alcestis* as the structuring plot for their psychoanalytic sessions in her memoir of Freud, "Writing on the Wall." This account was first published in *Life and Letters To-Day* in 1945–46. Given that Eliot was a reader of the periodical,[74] and that his Herakles is indeed a psychiatrist, I doubt it could have escaped his notice; even Pound at St. Elizabeths was reading it.[75]

[69] See Arrowsmith, "Menander and Milk Wood," 293, 294.

[70] "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," 111. See also Jansen, "Heracles and Friendship," 95.

[71] April 3, 1945.

[72] Heilman, "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," 116, even claims that Aldington's translation occasionally sounds like Eliot. Aldington's account of the play in a short unpublished essay ("Greek Plays" TS; RAP 20/29) focuses on its essentially tragic nature despite its apparently happy ending.

[73] Eliot reports to Hale on October 19, 1939, that he already has a plot in mind for his next play but provides no other details.

[74] See, for example, *CP* 6, 789. Though Eliot hardly ever mentions H.D., they were both in London during the Second World War and even did a reading together (*HD/NHP* 22). The only letter from Eliot to H.D. in HDP is dated to 1943 (8/325).

[75] Pound writes to H.D. on July 9, 1946, "Just seen Lif. + Let. for Jan. // go ON to Frobenius," and mentions Goethe, with whom H.D. concludes her Freud piece. An earlier note (dated April 7, 1946), to which a postcard featuring a Minoan snake goddess from the sixteenth century BCE is attached, probably responds to an earlier installment of H.D.'s essay: "Frobenius wd/ have told you more about snakes + stones than Freud" (HDP 14/484).

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H.D.'s account of her time with Freud appears simultaneous, off the cuff, but is clearly retrospective – a constructed narrative. The *Alcestis* pattern is presented cannily.[76] As H.D. broods over Freud's age and potential death, she offers herself up: "I would change my years for his … Put H.D. in the place of Sigmund Freud" (*Tribute to Freud*, 74). This selfless gesture is patently not what it seems, given the larger context of their power struggle, for H.D. aims to usurp his position, to claim for herself "the Professor's" mantle. She does so here by masterfully manipulating the psychoanalytic scene. She "stumbles" into this desire, then prods herself into remembering who first articulated it – "Someone did it or offered to do it in a play once" – that is, into "realizing" the mythic/tragic pattern she is re-enacting in her life, much as Freud might unlock a male analysand's psyche by aligning his desires with Oedipus's.

> It was a Greek play, wasn't it? A woman – I don't remember her name – offered her years in exchange – to someone else – for something. What was it? There was Hercules or Herakles and a struggle with Death. Was the play called *Alcestis*? I wonder. And of course, one of those three must have written – there they are on the top of the Professor's case, to the right of the wide-opened double door that leads into his inner sanctum. Aeschylus? Sophocles? Euripides? Who wrote the *Alcestis*? But it doesn't really matter who wrote it, for the play is going on now – at any rate we are acting it, the old Professor and I. The old Professor doubles the part. He is Hercules struggling with Death and he is the beloved, about to die. Moreover he himself, in his own character, has made the dead live, has summoned a host of dead and dying children from the living tomb. (74)

In claiming this power away from Freud qua psychoanalyst and student of ancient tragedy, H.D. also proposes an alternative, and more resonant, myth for female psychic development: not Elektra's paternal obsession and maternal hatred, but Alcestis's self-sacrifice in favor of a male figure, an act that is both weak and strong. At the same time, as elsewhere in the essay, she doesn't lose sight of Freud's herculean accomplishment, and the way she formulates here – his resurrection of "dying children from the living tomb" – is positively Eliotic. In *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot's psychiatrist Herakles explicitly offers "to bring someone back from the dead," and when Edward/Admetus demurs ("That figure of speech is somewhat … dramatic"), he responds by insisting on everyday death and on the importance, and deceptions, of memory: "we die to each other daily. / What we know of other people / Is only our memory of the moments / During

[76] Murnaghan, "Daughter of Helen," 80, briefly discusses H.D.'s use of *Alcestis* in "Writing."

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which we knew them. And they have changed since then" (*CPP* 329). It becomes the psychiatrist's task to summon both Edward and his wife from their shell of a marriage and their world of spiritual death; midway through the process, the play's martyr figure Celia even comes to see her former lover Edward "Like a child who has wandered into a forest" (362). In both H.D.'s account of Freud and in Eliot's new Herakles we discern a social function that goes beyond having his own fight against death in the shirt of fire that Pound picks up on in *Women of Trachis*.

But besides the basic premise of *Alcestis* which both H.D. and Eliot thus extend, there are many threads present in H.D.'s staging that find their way into Eliot's play. Most obviously: the sense of the play "going on now," which suggests its timelessness, the lack of distance between "high art" and ordinary life, and the repetitive patterns of human behavior – for H.D., the model is Freudian, for Eliot, Christian. The play's currency is reinforced by H.D.'s (or the psychoanalyst's) consequent indifference to the identity of its creator, mirrored in Eliot's own too-covert allusions in *The Cocktail Party*. Then, the "doubled part" is further elaborated on by Eliot. Like H.D.'s, his savior is vulnerable too, having more in common with those he helps than with the otherworldly Celia: Harcourt-Reilly speaks of his "limitations" (*CPP* 367), and doesn't "understand / What I myself am saying" when it comes to Celia (*CPP* 368).[77] Eliot also doubles his Alcestis into Lavinia and Celia, "the ordinary woman and the saint,"[78] much as H.D. in the moment of writing is both analysand and analyst.

Eliot was, however, skeptical of psychoanalysis. Think, for example, of the list of fortune-telling practices that memorably opens "Dry Salvages" v (e.g., "To explore the womb, or tomb, or dreams; all these are usual / Pastimes and drugs") only to be contrasted with "annunciation" (*P* 199). His use of an analyst as his Herakles can be thought of as an attempt to wrest tragedy away from psychoanalysis by working within it in order to subtly provide a different model (much as H.D. herself is doing in "Writing on the Wall"). It is no surprise, then, that his Harcourt-Reilly cuts a strange figure. For one, he does not act alone, but as part of a fate-like group of conspirator-guardians, another one of whom is clearly superior.[79] When we see him in action as an analyst in the play's second act, he

[77] See also Arrowsmith, "English Verse Drama (11)," 427; Heilman, "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," 114–15.
[78] Heilman, "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," 110.
[79] Per Jansen, "Heracles and Friendship," 93, 94.

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makes a mockery of the standard psychoanalytic process. He denounces both dreams and childhood memories, rejects the "marvellous cure" he could offer (*CPP* 348), reveals that he "made enquiries" and obtained information "from outside sources" about his patients when they were slow in expressing their true feelings (354), and finally lies down on the couch himself (357). Even so, H.D. seems to have recognized some similarity. In her 1955 diary she aligns her analyst Erich Heydt (as *she* perceives him, obviously) with "T. S. Eliot's psychoanalyst in the Cocktail Party" ("Compassionate Friendship," 96).[80] "This is a Cocktail Party," she adds, despite the absence of cocktails (as indeed they are absent in Reilly's second appearance in the play, when he brings Alcestis/Lavinia back), because "there is a vibration, intoxication in the air" (96). She also places Heydt in a sequence of "initiators" – "Hermes, musician, healer, actor, charlatan maybe" (96) – from Pound on, which may include Eliot himself (141–42). That is, H.D., more attuned to Euripides, picks up from Eliot's play not the note of the sacrificial atonement, nor of making-do in a world that is necessarily corrupt, but the disruptive energies implicit in Reilly's appearance – not options closed off, but paths opened up that could be deceptive ("charlatan maybe"). Where Eliot takes H.D.'s Freud and trivializes him qua psychoanalyst while converting him into a figure that subtly initiates others into a Christian life, H.D. in turn maintains Eliot's idea of initiation but makes her psychoanalyst even less "serious" than her Freud had been and closer to an artist figure like herself or indeed Eliot. Hence her transfiguration of Herakles into "Hermes of the Ways" (96).

H.D. is not entirely off the mark when she uses Eliot's play to contemplate her own Greek poetic beginnings, for Eliot does so himself. Whether or not the impetus was given him by H.D.'s account of her sessions with Freud, Eliot sticks with *Alcestis* because it allows him to develop further the ideas and themes he had long pursued through his work with Greek. Unlike his version of *The Eumenides* or Seneca's *Hercules* plays, *Alcestis* is a play that explores different kinds of social relations – between gods and men, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, guests and hosts, servants and masters[81] – rather than focusing on an individual tragic figure. It is also a generically shifting tragedy; in echoing satyr plays through its rambunctious Herakles, it allows Eliot to return to his initial acted-upon

[80] She had apparently made this connection earlier, as Aldington reports to Pound August 28, 1953; (EPP 1/32). See also *HD/RA* 340.

[81] Jansen, "Heracles and Friendship."

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approach to Greek drama through comedy.[82] The context of a party where characters come and go is reminiscent of *Sweeney Agonistes*, with Harcourt-Reilly acting somewhat Sweeney-esque in the first act (drinking, singing). The play also calls back to Herakles' first appearance in Eliot's work in "Mr. Apollinax," which featured the following epigraph from Lucian: Ω τῆς καινότητος. Ἡράκλεις, τῆς παραδοξολογίας. εὐμήχανος ἄνθρωπος ("What novelty! By Herakles, what paradoxes! How inventive he is!").[83] Lucian's audience, whose exclamations these are, is as aware as Mr. Apollinax's hosts and fellow guests of his uniqueness, but cannot comprehend in what exactly it lies. "Herakles" is here a figure of speech. This Lucianic context,[84] as well as the satiric nature of Eliot's poem, do not suggest the hero's tragic resonances nor a profound belief in his cult, but rather – as if he is at best a synecdoche for the characterizations in the rest of the epigraph – the audience's bemused and ironized admiration for a different kind of man who, perhaps like the ambivalent figure of Herakles, is difficult to read. As the Mr. Apollinax of the poem disrupts afternoon tea, so Harcourt-Reilly disrupts and enlivens a cocktail party by revealing its previous dysfunction. Picking up this Herculean link, Eliot signals that he is in some ways starting over. He takes the questions posed in "Sweeney among the Nightingales" back in the serio-comic direction suggested by *Sweeney Agonistes*, rather than the serio-tragic one attempted through *Murder in the Cathedral*, developed in *The Family Reunion*, and concluded (if also undercut) in "Little Gidding" IV.

Thus, in *The Cocktail Party*, it is a different Herakles that Eliot turns to, and the challenge that he sets for himself and his audience is to not "ring the bell backward," as he puts it in "Little Gidding" III (*P* 206). For the most part, we are not asked to tolerate the importation of a ritual from a different era, but to convert a ritual already familiar – a cocktail party and, in the second act, a psychoanalytic session – into something only a little bit different. Eliot makes clear the particular nature of his intervention, of his use of the past and of the "foreign," by offering and rejecting two possible alternatives in the play's third act that roughly correspond to the uses of tragedy on the mid-1930s London stage. First, he mocks imitative art, through one of his more sympathetic characters, Peter Quilpe. Peter is writing a script for a film in which "the most decayed noble mansion in

[82] I am not suggesting satyr plays and comedies are interchangeable – only that some of the comic elements Eliot drew on for his *Sweeney Agonistes* had themselves satiric overtones.
[83] *P* 25; trans. Kilburn, quoted in *P* 437, slightly modified.
[84] See *P* 437–38.

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England" will have its decay studied by "a team of experts" so that it can be "reproduce[d]" in California (*CPP* 377, 378). The absurd exportation of decaying architecture for merely reproductive art is the equivalent of the modern staging of Greek tragedy "as is." It then finds its sociopolitical parallel in Celia's fate. Unlike the *Reunion*'s Harry, she has actually become a kind of missionary ("She had joined an order. A very austere one"; *CPP* 380), and, unlike Sweeney and Doris in *Sweeney Agonistes*, she has actually gone to a "cannibal isle" (*P* 121). In Celia's Kinkanja – "an island that you won't have heard of" – however, the "natives" have become cannibals only after the arrival of the Christians and after their conversion into Christianity (*CPP* 373). "So instead of eating monkeys [as the Christians do, offending the locals] / They are eating Christians," we learn, and Sweeney's threat to Doris that "I'll convert *you*! / Into a stew. / A nice little, white little, missionary stew" is fulfilled (*CPP* 375; *P* 121). Eliot makes sure to remind us again, right before the account of Celia's death, that "Europeans" have "of course" brought diseases to this island (*CPP* 380). So, then, when Celia stays behind after an insurrection to tend to "the dying natives" but is instead "taken" and "it would seem … crucified / Very near an ant-hill" (*CPP* 380, 381), any serious interpretation of her martyr's fate has been undercut by the emphasis on the wrongheadedness, immorality, and indeed absurdity of the entire situation.[85] As with the O'Neill *Electra* vis-à-vis Aeschylus, we see the surface trappings of Christianity but not the deeper process.

By presenting these two negative models of intercultural communication, namely imitation and infection – one looking backwards to the past and explored through art and place-ness, the other looking forward, towards cultural "progress" or salvation, broached through religion and British "culture" qua bureaucracy – Eliot shows us what (he hopes) his play isn't doing. He is not attempting to simply transpose and reconstruct the crumbling manor of Greek tragedy (or the crumbling manor of the British upper class, as *The Family Reunion* or "Burnt Norton" might lead some to believe) after studying it minutely, and he is not preaching his religious beliefs. The play ends exactly as it began: with a cocktail party at Lavinia and Edward's featuring the same guests – minus the crucified Celia, though the fact, rather than the details, of her death provides the

[85] This may have been partly instigated by Hale's negative reaction to the play. While on August 31, 1949, Eliot defensively claims that people need "a very violent shock" in order to "take holiness seriously," by October 25, 1949, he has taken *her* comments more seriously and reports that he has "ton[ed] down the martyrdom."

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impetus for a deeper discussion about guilt and responsibility. The remaining guests' faults are not gone, their conversation is no less incoherent and superficial, and their pursuits are, if anything, more suspect. After all, we hear from the film's screenwriter and from an agent of the British government in Kinkanja, while Harcourt-Reilly quotes an extended passage from Shelley's *Prometheus*, exactly the writer that Eliot had once singled out *because* his fervently expressed but immature beliefs interfered with his poetry.[86] But, like the chorus of aunts and uncles in *The Family Reunion*, these characters are just a little bit more honest or open with themselves and thus with each other, "mak[ing] the best of a bad job."[87] We might say the same of Eliot's approach to his original. If translation of Greek is destined to remain a "bad job," as Eliot had claimed already in 1916, then such ever more subtle soundings of Greek texts – of what can be heard in them from a distance, despite or even because of the obscurities of their language – may still be useful in laying down a common modern path.

[86] *CP* 4, 642, 647.
[87] *CPP* 356, 271.

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