

MYTHICAL FEAR AND CHRISTIAN REDEMPTION IN T. S. ELIOT'S VERSE DRAMA: *THE FAMILY REUNION*

EL MIEDO MÍTICO Y LA REDENCIÓN CRISTIANA EN EL TEATRO EN VERSO DE T. S. ELIOT: *THE FAMILY REUNION*

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ABSTRACT

The Family Reunion (1939) is Eliot's first onstage attempt to apply the mythical method of his poetry in verse drama, and more specifically to a drawing room setting. In this way, twentieth-century fear and anguish are enacted against Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, a timeless story of expiation told in the *Oresteia* trilogy. This paper focuses on Eliot's modern Orestes, Harry, who (like early poetry characters before him such as Prufrock, Gerontion and Sweeney) faces despair in ways that are exemplary for future plays. Moreover, this article highlights the central role that *The Family Reunion* holds in Eliot's dramatic production because of the unexpected way in which the play approaches the contemporary malady, relating it to the Christian motif of sin and expiation. Finally, this paper explores the similarities between Eliot's verse drama and the poetry of the *Four Quartets*, a sequence of poems written during his years of production for the stage and, to a great extent, along the same lines.

KEY WORDS: *The Family Reunion*; T. S. Eliot; verse drama; mythical fear; *The Eumenides*; Christian account; *Four Quartets*

RESUMEN

Con *The Family Reunion* (1939), Eliot ensaya por primera vez el método mítico de su poesía en el teatro en verso, más concretamente en un escenario burgués. De este modo,

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el miedo y la angustia del siglo xx se escenifican con el telón de fondo de *Las Euménides* de Esquilo, la historia intemporal de expiación que se relata en la trilogía *La Orestíada*. Este artículo se centra en el moderno Orestes de Eliot, Harry, quien, al igual que los personajes de la poesía temprana del autor (Sweeney, Prufrock o Gerontion) se enfrenta a la desesperación de un modo que Eliot irá afinando en sucesivas obras. Asimismo, subraya el papel principal de *The Family Reunion* como punto de inflexión en la producción dramática de Eliot, por cuanto la obra aborda novedosamente el malestar contemporáneo, relacionándolo con un relato cristiano de pecado, expiación y sacrificio. Por último, el artículo explora las semejanzas entre el teatro en verso de Eliot y la poesía de los *Cuatro cuartetos*, escritos durante los mismos años que su producción para la escena y, en gran medida, bajo idénticos parámetros.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *The Family Reunion*; T. S. Eliot; teatro en verso; miedo mítico; *Las Euménides*; relato cristiano; *Cuatro cuartetos*

1. INTRODUCTION

So far, Eliot's drama has received scarce critical attention in comparison with his poetry and essays. After the pioneering studies of D. E. Jones (1960), Carol Smith (1960), and E. M. Browne (1969), in later years, Randy Malamud's *Where the Words are Valid* (1994) and David Chinitz's *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2003) have repaired the existing critical deficiency. The latter introduced an innovative critical approach: they broke down the division between «high» and «low» art. Where Eliot was traditionally associated with «high culture», they highlighted his allegiance to «low» culture. In Chinitz's words, «Eliot's actual relations with popular culture [...] showed a far greater receptivity than either his supporters or his detractors [...] have realized or cared to admit» (2003: 4).

From this novel perspective, and after an early attempt with the jazzy scenes of *Sweeney Agonistes* in 1926, it is not so strange that Eliot should want to try his hand, in his mature years, at an art form aimed at a wider audience beyond the restricted circle of poetry lovers, as he confessed in his 1951 essay «Poetry and Drama». Indeed, the use of poetry onstage and for a public not necessarily keen on poetry as a genre had been a main critical concern throughout his career, highlighted in essays such as «The Possibility of a Poetic Drama» (1920) or «A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry» (1928).

Furthermore, in his focus on the blending of poetry and drama on a contemporary basis, Eliot was following an already existing anti-naturalistic theatrical movement, represented for example by the symbolist plays of Maeterlinck in France, the Irish Renaissance works of Yeats and Synge in Ireland, or the fusion of the popular with the avant-garde by Valle-Inclán and García Lorca in Spain. For all these authors, the term «poetry» onstage did not simply refer to the use of verse instead of prose. In a wider sense, it referred to the writing of theatre plays able to convey deeper layers of meaning than the ones merely visible, and therefore inherent to «the structure of the play as a whole. That is, the «poetry» is not in any one part of the play, or any of its elements, separately exhibited, but in the manner in which, and the degree to which, all the elements act in cooperation» (DONOGHUE, 1959: 6).

Unlike his French, Irish and Spanish counterparts, however, Eliot discarded remote or timeless settings in favour of contemporary, domestic milieus in which the use of poetry should blend with language registers pertaining to everyday exchanges (CUESTA GUADAÑO, 2017: 42). This specifically Eliotian approach to theatre singles him out from the rest of playwrights, both in his praxis and in the theoretical criticism on which it was founded, no less than his claim for a scene capable of transmitting a Christian view of life in a secularized world.

In the following pages I mean to offer a critical approach to one of Eliot's plays, *The Family Reunion*, whose importance among Eliot's theatrical repertoire amounts mainly to two factors: the discovery and employment, for the first time, of a verse form that resembles everyday speech, also known as the «conversational line»; and the creation of a particular drawing-room atmosphere framed by mythical/Christian values, that is, enacted outside explicitly religious environments (as was the case in the previous plays *The Rock* (1934) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935)) with a view to overcoming the limitations of a theatre form otherwise conventionally realistic.

This essay focuses on the psychological distress of the protagonist, Harry, a counterpart to Eliot's earlier poetic characters, who establishes a thematic and stylistic continuity between both genres, the poetic and the dramatic. Moreover, this study highlights the development of the mythical/Christian values onstage in new ways, from *The Family Reunion* onwards, thus questioning the reduced attention given to Eliot's theatrical production, from a thematic point of view, for a better understanding of his whole work, and in specific relation to his last poetry title, the *Four Quartets*.

2. FROM MYTHICAL FEAR TO CHRISTIAN REDEMPTION: THE FAMILY REUNION

In 1914, at the age of 25, Eliot voluntarily became an expatriate, thus rejecting the prospects of a promising academic career at Harvard, the foremost American University in the US, for the uncertainties of a poetic career in Europe. This did not, however, prevent him from setting a landmark with his early poetic oeuvre in the literary history of twentieth-century literature. Characters like Prufrock, Gerontion, Sweeney or the wastelanders offer a final version of the Anglo-American contemporary fear and anxiety in lyrical form. After Eliot, no western poet could write about such issues without these characters in mind.

Human anxiety, *angst* or fear are inherent to the human condition on addressing man's fallibility, and they have been depicted in western art and literature since antiquity. What makes them new at the beginning of the twentieth century is the psychological treatment that these themes acquire. In the urban, industrialized, godless, commoditized, and psychopathologized world that emerged from nineteenth-century positivism, the tragic traits of the classical hero give way to those of the anonymous, alienated, purposeless citizen. Eliot felt the need to express the current version of this ancient affliction in new poetic terms while still living in the US. The biblical prophetic line in *The Waste Land*'s «I will show you fear in a handful of dust» proves Eliot's attempt to trace modern man's

unrest to its cultural and religious origins. This way, through his literary and poetic characters, Eliot defies the avant-garde bias to sever all bonds with the past and anticipates postmodern ontological maladjustment.

Two decades after publishing some of his major poems, having settled in London, become a British subject, converted to Anglo-Catholicism (both these crucial events in his life took place in 1927) and established himself as an influential figure in the publishing industry and literary criticism, Eliot embarks on a new career: drama. With the precedent of the unfinished 1926 music-hall style piece, *Sweeney Agonistes*, and after completing the two commissioned religious plays *The Rock* (1934) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), Eliot tries his hand at a very particular version of the society play which he inaugurates with *The Family Reunion* (1939).¹ Other plays written along the same lines are *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958). In all of them, Eliot continues to represent human fear in simultaneously contemporary and classical settings. Furthermore, the anxiety of upper-middle class British citizens of the 1940s and 1950s, projected against the tapestry of Greek prototypes, blends with a Christian narrative of sin, expiation and sacrifice that points to the archetypal dimension of these inner realities.

At this point, a difference must be established between *anxiety* and *fear*, and the way they are thought of by existentialist philosophy. According to critic Richard E. Palmer, «the underlying mood in *The Family Reunion* is anxiety» and it «should not be confused with ordinary fear, for fear has an object, however precise or generalized; anxiety or dread, on the other hand, is a mood with no clearly definable object generating it (1962: 175).» Palmer argues that all the characters in *The Family Reunion* suffer from this undefinable anxiety, so typical of western twentieth-century societies, but only one, Harry, has the courage and finds the way to face, overcome, or merely articulate it.

In his attempt to project the drawing-room atmosphere of *The Family Reunion* against the wider meaning of myth, Eliot designs the play's plot following the classical model of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, focusing especially on the trilogy's third part, *The Eumenides*.² The hero, Orestes, has avenged his father's death by slaying his mother, Clytemnestra. Yet, once his mother is killed, the young prince is haunted by the Eumenides who order him to leave his home. Though visible to Orestes, the Eumenides remain invisible to the chorus of the women of Argos as well as to the modern audience.

In the opening scene of *The Family Reunion*, Harry, the heir to a decaying manor of eloquent name, Wishwood, is impatiently expected by his domineering mother (Amy), his sybil-like aunt (Agatha), his former playmate cousin Mary, and a group of dull relatives

¹ Preceded by his success as a poet and a critic, Eliot's commissioned plays *The Rock* and especially *Murder in the Cathedral* were a success at their premiere. In fact, *Murder in the Cathedral* has never stopped being staged and translated, unlike the other plays, except for the temporary success of *The Cocktail Party*. However, in «Poetry and Drama» Eliot admits having arrived at a creative dead end after *Murder in the Cathedral*, which he would overcome with *The Family Reunion*. (1951: 596).

² The myth of Orestes thematically joins *The Family Reunion* with the loose fragments of *Sweeney Agonistes*, Eliot's early attempt at drama in 1926 (SMITH, 1967: 113).

who sometimes act as the chorus. Harry, who returns home after years of absence, is burdened with the remorseful doubt about whether he has thrown his unstable wife off the deck of an ocean liner, a fact that remains unclear. His guilt takes the form of the Eumenides who remain invisible to the rest of the family:

HARRY. Come out!

[The curtains part revealing the Eumenides in the window embrasure]

Why do you show yourselves now for the first time?

When I knew her, I was not the same person.

I was not any person. Nothing that I did

Has to do with me. The accident of a dreaming moment,

Of a dreaming age, when I was someone else

Thinking of something else, puts me among you.

I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,

Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks

Incriminate, but that other person, if person

You thought I was: let your necrophily

Feed upon that carcase. They will not go.

MARY. Harry! There is no one here.

[She goes to the window and pulls the curtains across]

*FR, Part I, Scene II (311)*³

In *The Family Reunion* Eliot introduces the mythical collective character of the Eumenides not only as the elusive visual embodiment of a guilty conscience, but also as the vehicle of self-knowledge that will ultimately bring about redemption. As stage convention, and although Eliot himself expressed some misgivings about this in his 1951 essay «Poetry and Drama,» the Eumenides highlight Harry's inner development during his crucial encounters with his cousin Mary, Dr. Warburton and, especially, Aunt Agatha, who act as facilitators for a plausible spiritual outcome. The different way in which Harry addresses the Eumenides near the end of the play, free from anguish and ready to accept his destiny, reflects the process of inner development which he achieves with the help of these three characters:

HARRY: and this time

You cannot think that I am surprised to see you.

And you shall not think that I am afraid to see you.

This time, you are real, this time, you are outside me,

And just endurable. I know that you are ready,

Ready to leave Wishwood, and I am going with you.

You followed me here, where I thought I should escape you —

No! you were already here before I arrived.

Now I see at last that I am following you,

And I know that there can be only one itinerary

And one destination. Let us lose no time. I will follow.

FR, Part II, Scene II (336)

³ Quotes from *The Family Reunion* and *Four Quartets* refer to *The Complete Poems and Plays* (see «Works Cited»). Part and scene of the play, and poem section are indicated, as well as page numbers.

As Carol Smith argues in *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice*, at this point Harry «sees for the first time that the Eumenides are to be followed, not fled from, for to those who are permitted to view them they are more real than the illusions which the world imposes» (1963: 129). In only two acts full of passionate dialogues about past secrets and repressed guilt, the play traces Harry's path from distressed refusal to serene acceptance. Only then does the possibility of a future redemptive path open up for him: «I will follow.»

In his depiction of the Eumenides, Eliot follows Aeschylus quite faithfully, whereas he departs from the Greek playwright by the different roles he assigns to his characters. In fact, Eliot's main challenge, to show contemporary fear while relating it to the circular history of man (*kronos* vs. *kairós*) is based on the onstage deployment of the mythical method, which he explains in his 1923 essay «*Ulysses, Order and Myth*». Focusing on Joyce's resort to the *Odyssey* for the creation of Leopold Bloom, Eliot describes the mythical method as «manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity». For him, this is «a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history» (2014: 478).

Eliot's use of the mythical method has been mainly interpreted where it was first put to test in *The Waste Land* (PATEA, 2007: 91-110). Through the inclusion of the mythical method in poetry, Eliot clearly prioritizes juxtaposed fragmentation over a coherent narrative or discursive flow. In contrast, its transposition to the theatrical scene responds to the different demands that drama poses in comparison with poetry. In this regard, *The Family Reunion* inaugurates a technique which will be perfected in the later plays in which supernatural elements and Greek choruses are gradually replaced by bringing together dramatic action and speech in more accurate ways. According to R. G. Tanner, who has studied Eliot's dramas in the light of their Greek models, Eliot uses the ancient drama mainly as a departure point, not evidently clear to spectators. However, he freely revises and develops his own plots «in modern terms,» thus adapting them to the circumstances of mid-twentieth-century characters, so different from those of Greek heroes and gods (1970: 118).

Nevertheless, it is the blending of the classical inspiration with the Christian outlook, certainly indebted to the author's religious conversion, which gives us the real scope of Eliot's dramatic attempt from *The Family Reunion* onwards. Christian values are this way introduced alongside the Greek plot underlying the action. From this perspective, and as Jewel Spears Brooker argues, the curse of Harry's family, unlike that of Orestes, should not be regarded as crime, but as sin (2020). Agatha expresses this after revealing the painful truth about the family's secret to Harry:

AGATHA. What we have written is not a story of detection,
Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.
FR, Part II, Scene II (333)

By means of this oracular remark, Agatha does more than appease Harry's guilty conscience. She redirects the modern hero's attention to the reality of the present instead of chimeric past events, thus stopping his psychic blockage and allowing him to begin planning his future in a meaningful way. At a deeper level, she is guiding Harry's despair

and hopelessness, symbolic of the contemporary *everyman*, towards the path of Christian consolation. Only a few lines above, Harry's rant proceeded as follows:

HARRY. What you call the normal
Is merely the unreal and the unimportant.
I was like that in a way, so long as I could think
Even of my own life as an isolated ruin,
A casual bit of waste in an orderly universe.
But it begins to seem just part of some huge disaster,
Some monstrous mistake and aberration
Of all men, of the world, which I cannot put in order.
If you only knew the years that I have had to live
Since I came home, a few hours ago, to Wishwood.

In Harry's desperate, lofty speech, there is a curious correspondence between the profusion of terms that express his anguish («ruin,» «waste,» «disaster,» «mistake and aberration»), together with the adjectives through which they are emphatically qualified («isolated,» «huge,» «monstrous») and the images that counter chaos («an orderly universe,» «put in order»). To this wallowing in disgrace, Agatha gives a concise and appropriate answer:

AGATHA. We must try to penetrate the other private worlds
Of make-believe and fear. To rest in our own suffering
Is evasion of suffering. We must learn to suffer more.
FR, Part 2, Scene 1 (333)

In this extract, suffering attains a collective dimension, namely, that of redemption through sacrifice for the sake of others. Thus, when Harry experiences his own moment of *anagnorisis*, that is, the classical enlightenment which, according to Christian faith, should not be tragic but redemptive, he is ready to depart in peace, however obscure and uncertain his mission remains. The protagonist's abandonment of the course of life he had originally planned will gain force as a dramatic resource in future plays, in which the concept of «sacrifice» will become more pronounced and more clearly charged with religious connotations. Parallel to the larger importance of Christian signs, the resort to mythical elements such as Greek props, character models and allusions will become less and less identifiable. However, it is the mixture of both sources, mythical and Christian, what allows Eliot's plays to be read at the same time as timeless and contemporary dramas.

3. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS: *FOUR QUARTETS*, *THE COCKTAIL PARTY*, AND THE PRINCIPLES OF VERSE DRAMA

Eliot was working on *The Family Reunion* with a view to the renewal of drawing-room drama at the same time as he was writing the *Four Quartets*, published over a six-year period starting in 1935 and finally collected for the first time in 1943. Jewel Spears Brooker (2018) and Helen Gardner (1966) emphasize the change that both the *Four Quartets* and *The Family Reunion* illustrate, a move away from the nihilism of his earlier

characters towards a Christian understanding of life. Spears Brooker identifies «the turn in Eliot's imagination» during Eliot's journey to America in 1932-33, evident from the publication of «Burn Norton» in 1935, where «[h]e juxtaposes images of childhood and seasonal cycles, not to idealize his lost years, but to acknowledge that they are unredeemable» (2018:152), as it can be read in its opening lines:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.

«Burnt Norton», I (171)

Likewise, Gardner considers the *Four Quartets* the trigger for a more profound change of mood, evident in «The Dry Salvages» (1941) and «Little Gidding» (1942) as well as in the final plays *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958):

... we pass beyond the tragic sense to a mood that transcends and includes both the tragic and the comic vision of life [...] It is out of this mood that the last plays spring, and they may in one way be regarded as footnotes or *exempla* to the *Four Quartets*. (1966: 156)

The thematic similarities can be further traced in the resemblance of the verse forms that Eliot explores both in *Four Quartets* and in the plays. In his introduction to the Spanish translation of *Four Quartets*, Pujals Gesalí remarks the conversational tone, based on a flexible prosodic pattern of four main stresses, chosen by Eliot for these books (1999: 67). Compared with the stress patterns analyzed by Marjorie Lightfoot in *The Family Reunion* (1964) and in the rest of plays (1968), it is evident that both mindset and form belong, in the two cases, to the same structural principle.

Focusing on lexical choices, the conflict rendered in *The Family Reunion* also finds echo in parts of *Four Quartets*. If, in his lack of spiritual referents at the beginning of *The Family Reunion*, Harry resembles Eliot's early modern anti-heroes, his final understanding of the family events within the larger frame of transcendence can be properly aligned with the following lines of «The Dry Salvages:»

...the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations — not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:
The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the primitive terror.

«The Dry Salvages» II (187)

The «primitive terror» that joins present and past, personal life and the larger continuum of civilization is an all-encompassing concept; an ancient term invested with a

modern meaning, which Harry understands at the end of *The Family Reunion* when fear gives way to Christian love:

HARRY. ... It is love and terror
 Of what waits and wants me, and will not let me fall.
 [...]
 ... Why I have this election
 I do not understand. It must have been preparing always,
 And I see it was what I always wanted. Strength demanded
 That seems too much, is just strength enough given.
 I must follow the bright angels.

FR, Part II, Scene II (339)

Thus, since Harry fully realizes that the Eumenides are not his enemies but his guides, the force that leads him to a higher understanding of human nature, he detaches himself forever from the tormented Prufrocks and Sweeneys of Eliot's early poems. Furthermore, Harry paves the way for the creation of similar characters, such as Celia in *The Cocktail Party*. To be sure, Harry and Celia are the metaphorical expression of the higher philosophical concepts of the *Four Quartets* which acquire human dramatic credibility in the plays. In Dennis Donoghue's words:

Harry is an individual quasi-tragic hero only in relation to his private crisis, the «guilt» action: he is a symbolic hero in the conflict of values between the two groups of which the family consists. [...] Individual action is possible and full of meaning for Harry only because he is driven by divine guidance (the Eumenides). [...] There is in Harry something of the medieval knight as well as the modern psychiatrist «case»: he is one of the «elect.» (1959: 108)

The case of *The Cocktail Party* certainly marks a relevant advance in *The Family Reunion's* endeavor. Where Harry and, at a different level, his mother Amy are assisted by characters who ultimately lead them to the necessary self-knowledge for a spiritual awakening in *The Family Reunion*, the introduction of similar figures as guardians or assistants of individuals lost in a vital crisis in *The Cocktail Party* is much more explicitly developed. In addition, where Harry's future destination remains unclear at the end of *The Family Reunion*, Celia's sacrifice in *The Cocktail Party* is depicted as close to the Christian negative way (i.e. the renunciation of earthly life) in the path towards sainthood, and complete in its tragic denouement.

That is also the reason why the dramatic scheme around the negative way, as well as the role that the assistants play in it, can only be found in *The Family Reunion*, as Carol Smith argues, in a less developed phase than in subsequent plays:

There is, to be sure, a repudiation of human love as represented by Harry's mother's desire to impose her will on his future, by Mary's offer of love which Harry momentarily hopes might save him, and by Harry's wife's attempt to dominate him by her will. Nevertheless, in the character of Agatha, who leads him to the proper recognition of his past and his future through her love for him and thus to the «other side of despair,» there exists a merging of human and divine Love. This new direction has been followed in Eliot's later plays by a succession of

characters who are part human, part divine, and who function to show the penitent his way. (1967: 118-119).

Undoubtedly, Eliot's own personal situation had an influence on the rejection of human love at this stage of his dramatic career. Eliot's unfortunate marriage with Vivienne Haigh-Wood hovers over the absent, problematic character of Harry's wife in *The Family Reunion*, while Eliot's later commitment with the Church, and his understanding that a relationship with Emily Hale (his intimate friend and muse) was impossible, lies behind Harry's refusal of his cousin Mary's love (GORDON, 2012: 317). In contrast, by the time the author publishes *The Elder Statesman* in 1959 (a play that he dedicates to his second wife Esmé Valerie Fletcher), human love, exemplified by the characters of Charles and Monica, seems an appropriate way of overcoming nihilist fear and modern anxiety.⁴

Such a hopeful solution to the problem of contemporary spiritual malady had not been so fully and convincingly attempted in the previous plays, *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*. From this viewpoint, *The Family Reunion* signals the beginning of a progress «towards acceptance of the conditions of life in this world,» reinforced by universal values such as «sympathy, human compassion, and moral concern» (GARDNER, 1966: 155).

Gardner's statement is coherent with Spears Brooker's claim about «the turn in Eliot's imagination,» chronologically applicable to the preparation of both *The Family Reunion* and the *Four Quartets*.⁵ This fact makes the traditional critical underestimation of Eliot's theatrical production, or the lack of connection between his plays and his poetry, all the more inexplicable.

4. CONCLUSION

Eliot wrote «Poetry and Drama» in the interval between the composition of *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*. In this essay, he attributes numerous errors of composition, characterization, and speech to *The Family Reunion* for which he makes amends in *The Cocktail Party*. From the latter play onwards, Eliot consciously chooses not to follow the Greek models so openly in his plays, a decision that leads him to rely more and more on speech in the form of verse drama (what has been informally named «the conversational line») rather than on supernatural effects. At the core of his concerns, though, lies a similar attempt to stage mythical fear in credible contemporary settings; fear embodied, moreover, under the form of suffering and of Christian expiation, redemption, and sacrifice, and ultimately conducive to a broader understanding of human nature

⁴ For this different approach to human love and its relationship with Eliot's second marriage, see Llorens-Cubedo (2013: 81-96).

⁵ In this regard, the reproach towards Eliot's drama for his conservative views in a society more and more detached from any religious stimulus may easily be refuted: where it might be difficult to understand Celia's reasons for renouncing her glamorous life in *Cocktail Party*, the denouement of *The Elder Statesman* can be universally accepted, within or without Christian principles. The case of *The Confidential Clerk*, with its mixture of fable around the «changeling» figure and comedy of manners, poses other interpretive problems.

through art, in a similar way to the ancient staging of the irreversibility of fate by the Greek authors he takes as models. The very shortcomings that Eliot detected in the composition of *The Family Reunion* constitute the scope of his future endeavors and mark the crucial role of this play in the whole of his dramatic contributions. Curiously enough, some of the theatrical features acknowledged as flaws in *The Family Reunion* by Eliot himself in «Poetry and Drama» and suppressed in later plays, such as the use of choruses and of verse not relevant to dramatic action, are regarded utterly successful by some critics that, reversely, criticize the progressive «thinning» of the conversational line in subsequent plays (CUDA, 2016: 128-29; KNIEGER, 1961: 391).

In addition to this contradictory judgement, the changes of theatrical tastes from the 1950s onwards introduced, on the one hand, by the European theatre of the absurd (Ionesco, Genet, Becket); and on the other hand, by the socially-oriented British playwrights within the «Angry Young Men» movement (Osborne, Wesker, Pinter), contributed to Eliot's partial oblivion in his theatrical facet: «By comparison with the wildly unpredictable absurdist the poetic dramatists [T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry] seemed little different from the conventional realistic drawing-room comedy writers with whom they were competing» (LEEMING, 1989: 9).

This paper, however, does not deal with the intrinsic success or failure of Eliot's proposals as a dramatist, but with the key role that they play for a correct estimation of his oeuvre. In 1936, in a radio broadcast entitled «The Need for Poetic Drama,» Eliot stated his search for a versification form adequate for the stage. A year later, in his essay «Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern,» he expressed his wish to approach religious principles to contemporary, domestic settings. Both resolutions are applied for the first time in *The Family Reunion*, a play that took him two years to finish and that constitutes «the turning point» (LIGHTFOOT, 1968: 191) of his vision of contemporary theatre, further explained in his essays.

Through the rhythm provided by the use of poetry onstage, Eliot attempted to make his plays operate on two simultaneous planes: «The superficial one involving character and plot, and a deeper, more universal one pertaining to spiritual realities» (CUDA, 2016: 118). Regardless of its outcome and the predominant reception, Eliot's proposal was coherent with available theories about twentieth-century poetic drama, expected to be «two-levelled. All the events [...] happen on the life-level, but simultaneously they point to the inner strata of man's existence» (RULEWICZ, 1973: 172). Moreover, Eliot made use of this new possibility for poetic drama on the contemporary scene in unexpectedly innovative ways in comparison with other verse dramatists, ways that converge in the moral issues raised and the theatrical techniques adopted in *The Family Reunion* and develop throughout the rest of the plays.

Eliot assumed this new route, halfway between classical and religious ritual and contemporary drama, ancient spirituality and modern secularization, at the cusp of his career, putting his consolidated reputation at risk. If, at the beginning, such reputation (reinforced by the Nobel award in 1948) helped the favorable reception of his plays, in the long run it has collected somewhat acritical indifference, in spite of the countless essays through which Eliot expressed his deep, serious involvement in the matter and honestly

(sometimes even self-deprecatingly) assessed his ongoing praxis. Consequently, a close reading of the main issues at stake in Eliot's theatre from the pivotal position of *The Family Reunion* should cast a more accurate light upon the poet, the critic, and the playwright; upon the intrinsic relationship among these three different aspects; and upon Eliot's moral concern for crucial concepts, embedded in his imaginative powers, such as fear and redemption, and at all the stages of his long-life career.

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