

ANALYSIS

“The Family Reunion” (1939)

T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“Stimulated by his first reception on the regular stage, Eliot attempted in *The Family Reunion* something far more difficult, a play that would use the setting and characters of drawing-room comedy and that would still include the Eumenides in its cast. He seems to have been thinking of the method evolved by Henry James for his ‘ghost’ stories, where the design was to have ‘the strange and sinister embroidered on the very type of the normal and easy.’ ‘Nothing is more dramatic than a ghost,’ observed one of the speakers in Eliot’s ‘Dialogue,’ but it is one thing to suggest an eerie presence in fiction, quite another to present the Eumenides in evening dress in the embrasure of a window on the modern stage, and here Eliot’s inexperience in the theatre betrayed him into a device that failed badly in its effect.

He may have been thinking also of Chekhov’s haunted world of social decay, and it is significant that two other Americans of Eliot’s generation, O’Neill in *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Jeffers in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, have dramatized the theme of a curse on a house by a rehandling of the Orestes story. Eliot’s device for his chorus here is also comparable to some of O’Neill’s previous experiments in having his characters withdraw momentarily from the action to voice their inner thoughts. Eliot’s choric group consists of the hero’s uncles and aunts, who are on hand for his return, after a long absence, for his mother’s birthday. They are unlike the usual Greek chorus in that their role is not to illuminate the action, but to express their baffled inability to understand what is happening: ‘We do not know what we are doing... / We have lost our way in the dark.’

Eliot is absorbed again, in much the same fashion as he was in *Sweeney*, in projecting different levels of consciousness, but one danger here is that his country-house social group is so inert and lifeless that we can hardly become interested in them even as a contrast with the hero, the titular head of the house, Harry, Lord Monchensey. Most of the verse that they speak has a deliberate flatness, and seems, indeed, to have been designed to sound on the stage hardly distinguishable from prose. In this kind of effort to approximate colloquial speech, Eliot seems to have forgotten his earlier and wiser principle that verse should always be used for a heightening, that whatever can now be said just as well in prose is better said in prose.

The hero is in a state of mind which he finds it almost impossible to explain to anyone else. Seven years before, after a brief and disastrous marriage, while travelling on an ocean liner, he either pushed his wife overboard or at least watched her slip and drown. He is not quite clear which, but he had wanted to kill her, and has felt himself pursued ever since, as though by the Furies. The difference from the Furies in Aeschylus is profound, and suggests that in handling his ambiguous material Eliot failed to keep to his realization that the action in a play must be ‘perfectly intelligible,’ that, in fact, he failed on this occasion to find an adequate ‘objective correlative.’

Only in the last play of Aeschylus’ trilogy are the Erinyes transformed into the Eumenides. The moment is of the widest social significance. The baleful Furies who have tracked down the murderer Orestes are forced by Athena to yield and to become benevolent guardians of the state. What is dramatized thereby is the immense step that was taken by mankind in giving up primitive blood-vengeance, a life for a life, and submitting to the ordered process of courts of law. Orestes is then released as having done sufficient expiation for his terrible vengeance of his father’s death upon his mother, and the curse of the house is at an end. Eliot wanted to suggest a comparable transformation.

Harry has long felt himself followed and watched, but it is only upon his return to Wishwood that he finally sees his pursuers and comes to recognize their true meaning. The two scenes in which they appear on the stage are between Harry and his cousin Mary, whom his strong-willed mother had once designed for his wife, and between Harry and his Aunt Agatha, the one deeply perceptive and sympathetic member of

his family. But these scenes, though here Eliot quickened and intensified his verse, are very obscure, owing to Harry's own obsessed state, and do not begin to convey to the audience the intention that Eliot outlined in a letter to Martin Browne:

'The scene with Mary is meant to bring out, as I am aware it fails to, the conflict inside him between...repulsion for Mary as a woman, and the attraction which the *normal* part of him that is left, feels toward her personally *for the first time*. This is the first time since his marriage ('there was no ecstasy') that he has been attracted towards any woman. The attraction glimmers for a moment in his mind, half-consciously as a possible 'way of escape,' and the Furies (for the Furies are *divine* instruments, not simple hell-hounds) come in the nick of time to warn him away from this evasion—though at that moment he misunderstands their function. Now, this attraction towards Mary has stirred him up, but, owing to his mental state, is incapable of developing; therefore he finds a refuge in an ambiguous relation—the attraction, half of a son and half of a lover, to Agatha, who reciprocates in somewhat the same way. And this gives the cue for the second appearance of the Furies, more patently in their role of divine messengers, to let him know clearly that the only way out is purgation and holiness. They become exactly 'hounds of heaven.' And Agatha understands this clearly, though Harry only understands it yet in flashes. So Harry's career needs to be completed by an *Orestes* or an *Oedipus at Colonnos*.' [T. S. Eliot]

In the scene with Agatha, Harry comes at least to know his situation. She tells him, to relieve his mind, that his father, long since dead, had fallen in love with her and had wanted to kill Harry's mother, but that she, Agatha, had kept him from doing so. Nevertheless, the thought was there, and Harry must now expiate a repetition of the same crime.... By finding an equivalent for the transformation of the Furies through the difference between Hell and Purgatory, in the acceptance of the purifying fire, Eliot has tied the Eumenides into his pattern of thought, but he has hardly been explicit enough to take an audience with him. Also, the inferiority for dramatic purposes of Harry's story to that of Orestes is manifest, since the hatred of a wife, though repeated two generations, does not, as Eliot handles it, assume much more than private significance.

There are also some echoes of *Hamlet* in Harry's situation... And when his family, still maintaining that he suffers from delusions, sets the old family doctor to spy out the cause of his neurosis, they suggest the behavior of the King and Polonius. Strangely enough, there is also a reminder of what Eliot found unsatisfactory in *Hamlet* as a play: that Shakespeare gives the sense there of struggling with some 'intractable' material that he could not bring to light, that... 'Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother, but his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her.'

Eliot has found the peculiar genius of Cyril Tourneur to consist in his expression of 'the loathing and horror of life itself.' Something of that quality is infused into Harry, Lord Monchensey, but his objective situation simply will not support it. After Agatha's revelation, Harry accepts the fact that his destiny is to suffer more, not to evade, no longer to flee from but to 'follow the Furies'—a phrase which at one time was Eliot's tentative title for the play. Yet Harry can speak of his future in only the most general terms: 'Where does one go from a world of insanity?..'

But when, in lieu of the traditional chariot of the *deus ex machina*, we have the highpowered car in which his faithful valet, after returning to pick up his Lordship's cigarette case, is to drive him away, the break between the surface of the play and the depth it is meant to symbolize becomes ludicrous and irreparable. By no suspension of disbelief can we conceive how Harry, whose life seems to have been passed mainly in resorts and luxury hotels, can undergo the discipline of suffering in any broadly meaningful sense. And when, after his departure, Agatha closes the play by reciting a rune to end the curse while she and Mary make a stylized dance around the birthday cake and blow out the candles, so that the 'last words shall be spoken in the dark,' as in the service of *tenebrae*, the effect seems an unintentional parody of liturgy rather than a reinvigoration from it.

Eliot's belief in the value of poetic drama is based on its richer resources for transcending 'the ephemeral and superficial,' and for concentrating upon 'the permanent struggles and conflicts of human beings.' Only through such struggles is character revealed. One of Eliot's greatest gifts in his earlier dramatic lyrics was the power to suggest the essence of a character in a few lines. But a play requires more

than the flash of suggestion; it requires development through a significant action. The most devastating aspects of *The Family Reunion* are the unexamined implications of Harry's conduct. Whether or not he pushed his wife overboard, she went to her death by drowning; but the loss of her life, other than a phase of the hero's education, is made a ground of no remorse....

Harry's heightened awareness, through his talk with Agatha, of the meaning of what has happened to him produces no access of pity for his wife, but only a renewed ruthlessness towards his mother. Unlike Orestes, he does not murder her, but he becomes none the less the instrument of her death. Warned by the doctor that his mother is at an age where she cannot stand a shock, he produces one by breaking with her and leaving Wishwood; and we learn that she is dead before the curtain falls. Hers is the character of blind pride and selfish will that brings on *nemesis*, but Harry's utter lack of compunction seems nonetheless unnatural. We are reminded very forcibly of the sentence from St. John of the Cross that Eliot prefixed to *Sweeney*: 'Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.' Though Agatha may tell Harry that 'Love compels cruelty / To those who do not understand love.' Eliot has not succeeded in persuading us that Harry has anything of the overmastering love of God that alone could give sanction to the mystic's terrible renunciation.

The contrast with Eliot's Becket is revelatory. His presentation of the archbishop was limited but coherent. He was not writing a drama of disastrous pride like *Lear*, but a drama of pride overcome. His Becket, after resisting the tempters, is a 'sanctified being'... Such an image, to be sure, greatly simplifies the actual figure concerning whom historians are still divided as to whether he fought at the last 'for an idea' or 'for the humiliation' of his opponent Henry II. In Eliot's Anglo-Catholic belief Becket is a martyr, but the poet makes him a saint even in this life. He gives none of the flare-up of the natural man who was reported to have met Reginald FitzUrse, the leader of the murderers, with the angry denunciation, 'you pander.' But if Eliot lost something of the human being in the ritualistic priest, even if his Becket, in the consciousness of his mission, barely escapes from 'the pride that apes humility,' Eliot managed to dramatize permanent issues.

He could do it since—as was not the case in *The Family Reunion*—he had grasped and interpreted a social context. He was aware that his conception of history ran contrary to that of a secular age, and one of his most striking passages is that in which Becket addresses the audience with a prophetic vision.... The Fourth Tempter also looks ahead to the Reformation, when Becket's shrine will be pillaged... One reason why Eliot could give an urgency to these reflections is that he was not writing about the past alone. As Becket went on to denounce indifference, oppression, and exploitation, as he gave his life 'to the Law of God above the Law of Man,' Eliot was writing also against the then rising menace of Fascism, when violent men comparable to Reginald FitzUrse took power into their own hands. Eliot bore out again thereby what he asserted about Pound's translations, that in possessing the past a poet could suggest the present. When he wrote 'The Waste Land,' he had also proved the converse, but he could not do so in *The Family Reunion*.

Perhaps his increasing sense of the degradation and decay of the modern world had gradually numbed him against any strong feeling for such immediate issues as Becket had faced. Although he wrote an essay about 'the idea of a Christian society,' when confronted with one of the sharpest-drawn crises of our own time, he replied to a questionnaire on loyalist Spain: 'While I am naturally sympathetic, I still feel convinced that it is best that at least a few men of letters should remain isolated, and take no part in these collective activities.' One wonders whether such detachment could be possible for any dramatist who would meet the exacting standards held up by Granville-Barker: that the dramatic art in its fully developed form is the working-out...not of the self-realization of the individual, but of society itself.

Whatever the reason, Eliot could not contrive to endow his Eumenides with any of the collective significance that they possessed for the Greeks. It may also be argued that a mind as saturated with St. John's 'dark night of the soul' as Eliot has revealed himself to be in his *Quartets* may produce profound contemplative poetry, but is unlikely to have sufficient closeness to human beings to present their conflicts concretely.... In spite of the failure of *The Family Reunion*...one should not underestimate the new possibilities that Eliot has already opened for poetic drama.... Even more remarkable than Eliot's dramatic concentration is the resonance of his verse, the variety that he gains through its stylized patterns."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Achievement of T. S. Eliot, 3rd edition
(1935, 1947; Oxford/Galaxy 1959) 165-174

“Harry, Lord Monchensey, returns to his English country home, after eight years abroad following the death at sea of his young wife. The occasion is the birthday of his mother, Amy, imperious matriarch of the family, which also includes her sisters, Ivy, Violet, and Agatha, the last being principal of a women’s college; her brothers-in-law, Gerald and Charles Piper; and the penniless cousin Mary. Harry does not conceal his contempt for the others, and shows his neurotic, guilt-ridden condition by a blurted confession that he murdered his wife. He has returned in search of inner peace, but the avenging spirits (Eumenides) now become visible, even to Agatha and Mary, although not to the others. Anxious for her son’s sanity, Amy summons Dr. Warburton, and the doctor warns Harry that any sudden emotion may kill his mother.

Harry and Agatha have a talk, and he discovers the basis of their sympathy when she reveals that his father had loved her, not Amy, who had used him merely to have the children and home she desired. The father’s frustrated desire to murder his wife seems to have been inherited by the son, whose sense of guilt is part of the fated atonement. Harry departs to complete his ‘pilgrimage of expiation,’ and the shock kills Amy, in which the family unity she has sustained is destroyed.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 239

“This is the story of Lord Monchensey, who murders his wife and returns home to his mother Amy eight years later, pursued by Furies, hoping to find peace. The play is written in cadenced verse which rises to intenser meters at moments of dramatic tension. It has been performed widely, the most recent major production in America having been at the Phonenix Theater, New York City, in 1958.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 322-23

Michael Hollister (2016)

