

The Experience And Its Communication

In *The Family Reunion*

Kiyoshi OGAWA

Prison, one of the most important images in Eliot's poems, implies the utter separation or isolation of self and the complete incapability of communication with others resulting therefrom. Eliot's career as a poet, especially the latter half, may well be said to have proceeded pivoting around the problem of how one can be liberated from the imprisoned and incommunicable state of self, that is, 'how I can meet you.' *The Family Reunion* written in 1938, about fifteen years after *The Waste Land*, is a work in which the process of the liberation can be most clearly traced, as it were, in retrospective in the form of the hero's private experience. A man's experience which defines him as an individual different from all others belongs to none but himself and so is incommunicable as it is. For it to be communicable, it should be deepened and purified inside him and furthermore transformed into something objective and universal as found in works of art, while, on the other hand, sensibility to appreciate and understand it will be required on the part of the communicated.

In the earlier period when Eliot was writing poems, not dramatic verse, there was no need for him to put the matter of communication to the readers into his consciousness; he had only to concentrate himself on objectifying the feelings, the various aspects of experience he was dealing with by finding words or images corresponding and equivalent to them. If he succeeded in doing so, he could expect that what he wanted to express, however subtle or ambiguous, would be rightly followed by sensible readers later. When he turned, however, to writing plays in verse for the theatre, a new problem necessarily arose to him: how the kind of experience which could be seized and expressed only through poetical visions should be communicated to the audience directly on the spot, which consisted of a wide variety of people multiply in understanding. Thus in his plays he had to spend a great deal of energy in cultivating a way to facilitate the communication to the audience including the contrivance of new versification or some devices of theatrical effects, while, in his plays as well as in his poems, he kept on pursuing his long-cherished essential problem of how one can break through the prison door of self and recover the communication with others. This double-focused endeavour on the

part of the author is discerned more or less in all his plays, but especially in *The Family Reunion* he seems to have tried to carry out both the role of a poet and the role of a playwright at the same time by treating the difficult problem of how one's private experience can be communicated to others in the form of a verse play.

1.

As is well known, Eliot quoted the following passage from F.H. Bradley: *Appearance And Reality* in the *Notes Of The Waste Land* in reference to the sound of the key which is only once heard to turn on the prison door in Part V, 1.141 of the poem:

‘My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feeling. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it.....In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.’¹⁾

Knowledge and Experience In The Philosophy Of F.H. Bradley published in 1964 after his death confirmed more evidently how strongly Eliot had been influenced by the ideas and the way of thinking of the philosopher before he began his career as a poet. In regard to the relationship between Eliot and Bradley, David Ward made a penetrating and suggestive remark in his recent book *Between Two Worlds* (1973) that ‘Bradley, for all his elegance and skill, had no finally satisfying answer to the question how we may break out of the windowless shell of our private world; how I may meet you.’ While Eliot, he says, having closed the door to Bradley’s ‘phase of being in which experience becomes immediate and only immediate, absolute and beyond understanding,’ ‘as a poet was to search for the lost key for the rest of his life.’²⁾

Whether Eliot’s turning from the course of the academic philosophy to the way of a poet was due to his discovery that Bradley’s world ‘is unified only by an act of faith’ and that ‘the Absolute responds only to an imaginary demand of feeling’³⁾ or due to other reasons will not be easily decided, but, it must be kept in our mind that Bradley had stood before him at the starting-point of his career as a poet as one who should be overcome and got over in a way different from his.

1) *Collected Poems* 1909—1962, London, 1963, p. 86

2) *T.S. Eliot Between Two Worlds*, London and Boston, 1973, p. 3 & 4

3) *Knowledge & Experience In The Philosophy Of F.H. Bradley*, London, 1964, p. 202

According to Bradley, as the quotation suggests, each individual makes a private world and since the immediate experience which is the most essential to the individual is enclosed within his own circle, there can be no mutual understanding or communication between individuals so far as it is concerned. The immediate experience in which every knowledge is originated is unknown even to the person who experiences it because knowledge comes only through the reasoning process of mind, still less known to others. This solipsistic way of thinking will be apparently discerned in almost every poem of Eliot as though it were an obsession of his, but, on the other hand, it must not be overlooked that there underlies an almost desperate endeavour to overcome it in most of his poems. Eliot, from some private experience of his own or merely as a matter of general terms, seems to have come to regard the solipsistic state of being as something so horrible and dreadful that he could not help expressing it with the image of prison or even that of hell and to have assigned himself the task of finding out the lost key of the door leading to the outer world throughout his life as a poet; to say 'as a poet' means that by means of language, a medium of communication, he tried to cut a way out of the completely closed and incommunicable private world of self. Accordingly, it may be said that from the very start of his life as a poet the antonymy of communication of the incommunicable was contained in his poetry and that it gave a peculiar tension and charm to each of his poems.

In his earlier poems from *Prufrock* to *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men* the disunited or dissolved self and its suffocated state of inaction resulting from it was ironically and sometimes shockingly depicted with the modernistic devices of poetry. Even in them the desire for the recovery of identity of self or the grobing for the possibility of communication with others may be discerned though paradoxically as a weak whisper of wish. But it is in his later poems beginning in *Ash-Wednesday* that we know that Eliot must have added to some new experience which enabled him to escape or at least find a clue of escaping from 'the windowless shell of the private world' and of glimpsing the unfolding of a new horizon of communication with others. The experience may have been derived from his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, as is generally acknowledged; we are not sure how far the conversion really affected his poetry but the later poems apparently show that he finally became aware that there was at least one way left to get out of the prison of self if one should be deprived of every wilful wish or every make-believe or pretension and in such a naked state of soul meet or be met by something or some one transcending him. Such a way of emancipation we see having taken gradually more concrete form in his later poems ranging from still somewhat negative *Ash-Wednesday* to more affirmative *Ariel Poems* and *Four Quartets*. It is in *The*

Family Reunion, however, that the process of this emancipation can be traced most clearly and minutely as a whole and in perspective.

2.

In *The Family Reunion* both the experience in his earlier poems and the experience in his later ones are combined as the experience of the hero. In 1933 Eliot made the following remark on Matthew Arnold:

‘He had neither walked in hell nor been rapt to heaven.’⁴⁾

and also:

‘The essential advantage for a poet is not, to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom and the horror and the glory.’⁵⁾

These critical words on Arnold are, turned over, the comments on the characteristics of his own poetical works, for the boredom and the horror and the glory which come out of a glimpse or an actual experience of hell and heaven make up the world of his poetical visions.

Such experience of horror and glory is something beyond the consciousness of our daily life and is something which can be barely caught in the corner of the eye and accordingly cannot but be expressed through poetical visions. It comes in such a chaotic form that it cannot be understood even by the person who experiences it and stays as something indescribable until it is given an appropriate expression through the ‘catalyst’ of a poet’s mind. To put it in another way, writing a poem means to give a form or an order to such a chaotic and indescribable experience by means of language and to transform it into something concrete and tangible. And it is such a kind of experience, that is, the experience of horror of hell and glory of heaven that is expressed as the experience the hero undergoes in the play.

By the way, the question whether the experience dealt with in his works was his own actual experience or merely a material to be made use of is a rather difficult and delicate problem, but concerning this problem Eliot was the best commentator on himself, for in 1929 he already made the following remark on *The Vita Nuova* in his essay on Dante, rejecting the one-sided view of either regarding it only as Dante’s biographical event or interpreting it to be an allegorical story, the conventional style of literature in his days:

4) *The Use Of Poetry & The Use Of Criticism*, London, 1933, p. 104

5) *Ibid.*, p. 106

'I find in it an account of a particular kind of experience: that is, of something which had actual experience (the experience of the 'confession' in the modern sense) and intellectual and imaginative experience (the experience of thought and the expression of dream) as its materials; and which became a third kind.'⁶⁾

It will not be wide of the mark to say that this remark can also be applied most aptly to his case, and it will be neither correct to see it only as a fiction from the viewpoint of 'depersonalization' found in one of his earliest essays, *Tradition And The Individual Talent*, nor will it be right if we regard it as his literal autobiography.

At the beginning of the play, what has happened to the hero, Harry, is presented as something unknown even to himself and accordingly beyond understanding of others. Though, at first, the audience are led to the suspicion that Harry really pushed his wife down from aboard the ship, it comes out soon that the matter with Harry is not such an external event but something more terrible that has taken place in his inner soul. He is not allowed to know what it is but is conscious, though vaguely, of the state of mind he has fallen into as its result, which he explains to his kinsmen as following:

The sudden solitude in a clouded desert
In a thick smoke, many creatures moving
Without direction, for no direction
Leads anywhere but round and round in that vapour,
Without purpose and without principle of conduct
In flickering intervals of light and darkness;
The partial anaesthesia of suffering without feeling
And partial observation of one's own automatism
While the slow stain sinks deeper through the skin
Tainting the flesh and discolouring the bone—
This is what matters, but it is unspeakable,
Untranslatable: I talk in general terms
Because the particular has no language. (Part I, sc. i)

The experience of hell told in these lines, which is to be further extended in the following scenes in the dialogues between Harry and Mary (Part I, sc. ii), between Harry and Warburton (Part II, sc. i) and between Harry and Agatha (Part II, sc. ii) with the metaphors such as cancer, filthiness, desert, old house, hospital and so on,

6) *Selected Essays*, London, 1951, p. 273

literally corresponds to that described or suggested already in *The Waste Land* or earlier works. One of the characteristics of the experience of hell depicted here is that it is felt as a completely inactive state of self in which nothing can be done but to wait for death coming, and another is that in the absolutely isolated state of being there is no way whatever leading to the outer world.

To escape from such a state of hell, recover his identity as a person and step into his future, he wishes, first of all, to break through the 'opacity' of incommunicability by meeting some one who can really understand him and share his experience. But it is impossible so long as what has happened to him remains 'the particular' which, as is mentioned in the last few lines of the quotation, is unspeakable, untranslatable and has no language except in general terms. To make it possible, his experience must be anyhow transmuted from the private to the public, from the subjective to the objective and from the particular to the universal. This process is carried out in the play by the author by making the hero look into what he is undergoing, try to speak it out in words and pursue its real cause thoroughly until it finally makes its appearance before him. The more Harry looks into his state of mind, the more inescapable and unsolvable it appears to be, just like a round desert without an exit, or a corridor leading nowhere, but he is somehow vaguely conscious that it has been caused not merely by his own misconduct but by something more deep rooted somewhere beyond his consciousness, and there, in fact, the clue to the escape is concealed. He says:

..... It is not my conscience,

Not my mind that is diseased, but the world I have to live in.

(Part I, sc. i)

In Part II again he says:

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.

(Part II, sc. i)

If he were an abnormal exception in an orderly universe, his misfortune could not but be ascribed to himself and there would be no way out of it whatsoever, but he

knows, though vaguely, that it is only part of some huge disaster of the world and that its real cause is somewhere beyond his existence. Beyond, however, does not mean outside, for he is conscious at the same time that he also has been involved inescapably in the huge disaster. This consciousness seems to be more overwhelming to him, just like the case of Hamlet, than when he can regard himself as a casual bit of ruin, but at least it means that he has a possibility left to him to meet some one who may have an experience similar to his in this disastrous world.

This clue to the escape, however, should not be sought merely outside, for before he can seize it he is required to look more intensely into his present state of wretchedness and step down into the dark depth of its origin following, as it were, the way of St. John of The Cross. That he expected he might recover his identity if he returned home turns out to be, after all, a wish never unfulfilled (Part I, sc. i), and also that it seemed to him for a moment that he could finally find a door leading to 'sunlight and singing' by sharing with Mary the memory of the innocent days of childhood undefiled with men's make-believe or pretensions proves to be a mere illusion (Part I, sc. ii) but the direction of his pursuit toward the past, that is, toward the origin of his being was not wrong; only it should have been a step further pushed backward into somewhere beyond his own memory or consciousness, into what St. John of The Cross called the deeper darkness. It may sound strange, but Eliot described the process in a very symbolical way as the hero's experience in his embryonic period; Agatha, noticing it is indispensable for his relief, reveals to Harry her secret in her youth that his father, who had fallen in love with her, had murder in his mind against his wife who then was pregnant with Harry, and it is only then that Harry comes to a true perception of what tormented him for a long time:

Now I see
I have been wounded in a war of phantoms,
Not by human beings—they have no more power than I.
The thing I thought were real are shadows and the real
Are what I thought were private shadows. O that awful privacy
Of the insane mind! Now I can live in public.

(Part II, sc. ii)

This discovery of reality gives him a sense of relief and even a feeling of happiness. It is irrational, as he himself says, that to know that his father had once had the same intention of murder as he did gives him a feeling of happiness. Yet we can understand it in the sense that what long tormented him turned out to be, to his great delight, not a mere hallucination from his private insane mind, but

something real which is more deep-rooted than his conscience as he was vaguely conscious before, something which can be shared commonly by humanity. This discovery does not necessarily mean his complete emancipation at once from the previous critical state but at least it means that the experience he is suffering has turned from the particular to the common, from the private to the public, from the subjective to the objective and from the unknowable to the knowable. If what he experienced ceases being unknowable and indescribable then it will necessarily lead to a way to understanding and communicability and also possibly a way to the final escape from the prison of isolation. The duet between Agatha and Harry which forms the climax of this play tells the delight of mutual understanding and communication of heart which thus has been recovered at least between the two:

Harry: In and out, in an endless drift
Of shrieking forms in a circular desert
Weaving with contagion of putrescent embraces
On dissolving bone. In and out, the movement
Until the chain broke, and I was left
Under the single eye above the desert.

Agatha: Up and down, through the stone passages
Of an immense and empty hospital
Pervaded by smell of disinfectant,
Looking straight ahead, passing barred windows.
Up and down. Until the chain breaks.

Harry:

The chain breaks,
The wheel stops, and the noise of machinery,
And the desert is cleared, under the judicial sun
Of the final eye, and the awful evacuation
Cleanses.

I was not there, you were not there, only our phantasms
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.

It must be noted that in the duet the both refer repeatedly to the unwinking eye, the single eye above the desert, the judicial sun of the final eye, for it suggests that, if it became possible for Harry to meet one who could understand and share his experience only when he came to know through the discovery of his father's secret that his suffering was not merely his own particular experience but

one based on something beyond himself, to use his own words, 'dreamt through me by the minds of others,' his emancipation from it also should come from somewhere transcending him. The processes of Harry's mind hitherto can be traced logically in the development of the scenes, but Eliot seems to show in the duet that the experience of emancipation ('The chain breaks.') essentially belongs to a mystic world, and that it is a matter of revelation from above which cannot but be glimpsed and expressed through the poetical visions such as the final eye and the rose-garden. At the duet scene we understand that Hero's desperate endeavour for true knowledge was an indispensable preparation for this moment of revelation and that his faith for it is the only way to enable him to step into his future. It may be said that here we can find a kind of conclusion about the problem of solipsism reached in this period by Eliot who once remarked that 'Bradley's world is unified only by an act of faith'.

3.

So far as the communication in literary works is concerned, enough sensibility to appreciate and understand it will be required on the part of the communicated as well as the author's endeavour in trying to communicate it.

In writing a poem a poet usually puts his mind and soul to giving form or expression to his materials. Communication to the readers may result therefrom but it is not his primary concern; in short, he writes as he pleases. Such a process of a poet's mind in writing a poem Eliot called the first voice, 'the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody' in his essay *The Three Voices Of Poetry*.⁷⁾ In the same essay he said that 'it was in 1938 that the third voice—the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse, that is, when he is saying what he can say within the limit of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character—began to force itself upon his ear'.⁸⁾ When he said it he must have had *The Family Reunion* in his mind, for 1938 was the year when the play was written or was being rewritten for its performance, so it may be rightly presumed that it was when he was writing this play that he became clearly conscious of the distinction between writing poems and writing dramatic verse.

To write verse, listening to the third voice, for many imaginary characters who require a variety of speeches most appropriate for each of them will not be an easy task for a poet and, in addition, there is a problem that he must write verse for an

7) *On Poetry And Poets*, London, 1956, p. 89

8) *Ibid.*, p. 92

audience who are least likely to read poems in their own room. Hence Eliot's laborious contrivances of versification and dramaturgy as told in *Poetry And Drama* and *The Three Voices*. In this respect, too, Eliot was the best commentator upon himself and there is almost nothing to add. But whether his devices were really effective enough to solve these problems will have to be discussed. Here we will take up only one or two of the dramatic devices which are most conspicuously found in *The Family Reunion* from the viewpoint of communication to the audience. First, Eliot tried in this play a means which was available only in the theatre, not in a book of poetry, that is, the appearance of the Eumenides on the stage. The Eumenides speak no words but their appearance plays an important role in it—the role to check Harry from lapsing into the deceitful home life (Part I, sc. i) or into the consolation of human love (Part I, sc. ii) and also the role to strengthen the meaning of liberation from ruin to salvation in the duet scene between Agatha and Harry with the association of their transfiguration from Furies to the Merciful in the classic tragedy (Part II, sc. ii), thus reflecting objectively Harry's state of mind at each stage. In *Poetry And Drama* Eliot talked of his anxiety about the unnaturalness of their appearance on the stage of modern situation. But today with the improved stage technique and ingenious use of lightening an efficient, rather than unnatural, introduction of them on the stage will be possible and then they will possibly produce quite an impressive effect on the audience as a projection of what is going on in the hero's mind. However efficient it may be, nevertheless, such a device should not be used repeatedly or to excess in a poetic drama, for the primary aim of a poetic drama lies in expression by means of language.

Another device which is discerned conspicuously in this play is his way of arrangement of characters. In *The Murder In The Cathedral* Eliot set up three kinds of characters according to Pascal's three orders, the order of charity, the order of the mind and the order of the earth. In this play he arranged three different kinds of characters according to their capacity of understanding, those who can understand most profoundly, those who can only a little, and those who cannot at all. The distinction may have come from his way of viewing humanity and it may not have been his specially intended device but it is certain that the arrangement was done to lead the audience on to true understanding through their natural desire to identify themselves with those of the highest level.

By the way, Shakespeare wrote such plays that every audience, clever or not, could enjoy them according to their capacity of understanding and probably Eliot intended to follow the example of Shakespeare when the audience came into his consciousness. It was apparently impossible, however, because, though he wrote in verse following Shakespeare, he essentially belonged to the lineage of Ibsen, father of the

modern problem drama, in that he had a definite theme to be delivered to the audience and that an elaborate and difficult one which should be treated only in verse. So though he created a variety of characters on the stage they all had to play the role to direct the audience's attention to the hero's problem rather than toward themselves.

To return to the point of discussion, by setting up three different kinds of characters according to their capacity of understanding the audience may be led to a higher understanding and it may be said to be an efficient way as such, but still a doubt remains whether, even with such help, the audience can really reach the summit of true understanding.

In case of the first voice the reader, as it were, eavesdrops on the voice of the poet speaking to himself. If the reader is sensible enough to understand what the poet is driving at or what is going on in his mind, then the voice will be communicated to him together with the meaning contained in it. If the voice falls short of his ear, the fault may be on either side, either the reader may not be sensible enough or the poet has failed in uttering his voice clearly and concretely. In either case, the touchstone will be whether or not the poet or the reader has what Pascal called *l'esprit de finesse*, the ability to acknowledge truth, the objective and universal in the most delicate field of the mind.

In seeking for a greater audience Eliot turned to plays, but in case of the third voice the circumstance concerning communication will not differ from the case of the first voice: the audience in the theatre eavesdrop the voice which an imaginary character is speaking to another imaginary one on the stage. Thanks to the author's great efforts to facilitate comprehension probably out of sympathy toward the audience who must show spontaneous response to the poetry they are hearing, they may be self-satisfied and feel that they could appreciate it. But is it really possible that such an experience as treated in *The Family Reunion*, that is, the experience of hell and emancipation from it should be understood in its real meaning by the audience? If there are any who can, they will be limited to those who are as sensible enough to appreciate and share the experience as do the readers of poems. So the difficulty of communication in a verse play would be safely said to be, after all, the same with the case of writing poems, so far as it is a kind of poetry, and especially so far as it tries to deal with the human experience, not in the aspect of its width or variety as found in Shakespeare's plays, but in the sphere of its depth as in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, as Eliot did in this play. E. Martin Browne's brief description of the history of its performances proves the difficulty:

'When it was first produced in 1939 it was not understood and was a failure

in the theatre. In 1946 the war had taught us something of what the poet was talking about; and in 1956, although its appeal remains confined to the serious audience, it is called by many critics Eliot's best play.⁹⁾

Nevertheless, it must not be overlooked that, as the latter half of the description suggests, in his endeavour to realise a new type of verse play again in the contemporary theatre Eliot achieved something in this play worth being appreciated not necessarily by many but by really sensible audience.

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9) *Four Modern Verse Plays*, edited by E. Martin Browne, London, 1961, p. 9